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OR,

The Boomer from Blissful Buttes.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "SILVERTIP STEVE," "THE GET-
THERE SHARP," "OKLAHOMA NICK,"
"OLD '49," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN WITH THE SHELLS.

"WELL, Horace, how goes it?"
"As you see, judge; from slowly to fair. Of course we can't expect the old boom back again, but I'll engage to show you the shadow of it, if you'll give me leave to send out word to the sports that Hugh Chadwick has come back to his old stamping-grounds, if only for a night!"

The judge laughed, shaking his head as their eyes met over their glasses. No man could better appreciate the compliment, for none knew better than he how surely it was founded on truth.

"I'd like it, Race; no man better," his voice

"GOOD-BY, GENTS!" RECKLESSLY LAUGHED THE DARING RESCUER, AS HE SPED AWAY FROM THE DUMFOUNDED LYNCHERS.

lowering to a confidential tone as the friends leaned against the bar, apart from the few drinkers who were being waited upon by the white-aproned assistant. "And if all goes well, I'm not so sure but what I'll have to give the boys one benefit before I leave town."

"Not for good and all, surely?"

"That's about it, Bolster. I've served my time, if you take the trouble to count up. Here I am, crowding fifty, growing frosty on the roof, with neither child, chick, nor old hen! Isn't it time I took a lay-off?"

"From that point of view, perhaps," came the reluctant admission. "But, with your going, Gopher Slope will lose the biggest half of its back-bone. Why, man, she'll hardly know her own face in the looking-glass! And as for the old sports— I say, Chadwick, an ideal! You're going to sell out your mining property, including the Neverfail Mine?"

"Unless something turns up crooked—yes."

"Well, the first payment ought to make you flush enough for a dozen, but I never yet met up with the man who had *too many* ducats. Now, pard in with me for just one year. We'll do all the irrigating for Gopher Slope, and with the crowd that syndicate ought to fetch here, to do full justice to their investment, we'll have to charter a train to carry our wealth back home! Say you'll do it, Hugh?"

Race Bolster certainly was in earnest, but the judge shook his head in smiling negation.

"I dare say you're right, far as the profits go, Horace, but I've outgrown all that, now. Fact is, I've got to go! Just got to, Race!"

There was nothing like a smile on his face now, and his whisper grew so hoarse, and unnatural, that, had Horace Bolster been looking in any other direction, he would never have recognized that voice.

"If it's anything like—my pocket is yours, Hugh, and—"

"No, no, old fellow; I've got *money* enough, and to spare. It's my nerves that— Who's yon fellow, Race?"

The proprietor of the Bon Ton Saloon turned swiftly toward the door, where a tall, stoop-shouldered man now stood, having just crossed the threshold, seeming in doubt whether to beat a hasty retreat or to venture further.

There was little in face, figure or garb, to cause alarm or even suspicion in the brain of so reputable a citizen as Judge Hugh Chadwick; yet Horace Bolster felt the hand that gripped his arm so sharply, give an unmistakable shiver as the stranger brought his eyes to bear on their faces.

"Never saw him before, to my knowledge," muttered Bolster, hurriedly. "If you don't fancy the fellow, say a word, and I'll bounce him, mighty quick!"

Chadwick drew a long breath, his almost savage grip relaxing, a wave of color relieving his unusual pallor.

"I thought—never mind, Race! The shadow of his hat fooled my eyes, first glimpse. I told you my nerves were going back on me!"

"Shall I bluff him off?" demanded Bolster, as the stranger slowly moved toward them. "All right," as those brown eyes flashed a negative. "Evening, stranger! Looking for anybody in particular?"

"Sufferin'— Boss, I reckon?" jerkily ejaculated the new-comer, giving a bow so abrupt as to send the limp brim of his felt hat flapping down to his nose, then unblinding himself by an awkward poke with his odd-looking, metal-bound staff.

"For lack of a better," nodded Bolster. "Can I serve you?"

"Ef kin an' will was made up o' the same letters, which they sca'celey ever mostly ain't—wuss luck the likes o' me!" sighed the fellow, with a dolorous wag of his pow, his pale, watery-blue eyes drooping to the top of his polished staff, his bony fingers nervously caressing the silver band some six inches from the top. "But, bein's you be the boss, why—"

"What do you want? If a free drink, ask the barkeeper."

"I knowed ye was clean white, boss, the fu'st glimps I ketched ont' ye," gratefully bowed the fellow, but quickly adding: "Thankin' ye all the same, but I kin pay my way, fur's drinks go. What I meant was— Now ye see it, gents!"

There came a slight click as the bony fingers gave that band of silver a twist, causing it to slip down the polished staff. At the same time the head of the staff opened in four equal parts, falling low enough to form a level square, carrying with them the corners of a bit of rich black velvet, until then hidden inside the hollowed wood.

Race Bolster gave a slight ejaculation of surprise, and the judge chuckled dryly as he said: "The old-time thimble-rig, modernized, eh? Where's your shells, my gentle gambolier?"

"Thar they be!" sighed the stranger, the hand which came forth from his bosom trembling visibly as he gazed gloomily upon the articles; a small black ball, and three shells, polished with long use, each being the half of an English walnut. "The cuss of a pore, broken-hearted, mis-able critter rest on 'em, too!"

"Roped in by a verdant hayseed, who begged

leave to show you just how *he* lost his wad?" laughed Chadwick, sneeringly. "Cleaned you out, of course, then told you to take the tools and pass the moral along. Horace, old man, we've been vegetating entirely too long!"

"Look ye, stranger, if—"

"Sunday, boss," meekly interposed the lank fellow, nervously fingering the shells as he added: "Saul Sunday, the Sad Man from San Saba, es folks hes got into the way o' callin' me sence the day—kin I tell ye, boss, an' you, gent? I'm ownin' up to hev'n' bin a bigger fool then Thompson's colt—an' *he* swum the river to git a drink at a mud-puttle—but I'd hate to be kicked out o' this, leavin' ye to reckon me up wuss then I really be: which is needless!"

Bolster glanced at his friend, and the judge nodded.

"Why not? It can't hurt us, and your customers have caught sight of the elephant. Please don't crowd, gentlemen. I dare say he'll give you all a chance to buck his game ere the night grows old; but just at present it's a sermon on the vanity and emptiness of human hopes that I see trembling on the tip of his tongue. *Spiel*, Saul Sunday!"

"I'd ruther yank a double-tooth, sir, an' you, gents," with a groan, and a bow that included all present. "But it's part o' the cuss piled on top o' me, 'long o' my own crazy doin's, an' so—"

"Time was, gents, when I was piert an' sassy as the top-loftiest one amongst ye! Time was when Saul Sunday could climb to the clouds in a gas-bag, an' proudly say that all his two eyes could drink in o' airth was his'n to hev an' to hold, 'thout no man to say he told a lie, or didn't hev the title-deeds to back up his claims. Time was—but time hain't that way no longer—wuss luck me!"

"'Twasn't wine, wimmen nur keerds as pulled me down to what ye see left afore ye, gents. 'Twas bettin' on 'nother man's game, an' backin' the two eyes o' me 'g'inst the ten fingers of a critter as knowed more at weanin'-time then I'll ever store up ef I should live to be M'thusaler's great-gran'dad! An' *sech* a game, gents! Like this—on'y a heap sight more so!"

His long fingers flew swiftly to and fro above the velvet table, shifting the polished shells and the little black ball, finally leaving the three shells in a row, with the "little joker" hidden beneath one of the trio.

The judge picked up one of the shells, laying bare the black ball, not a little to his own surprise, though he could have made oath he had kept track of the joker, only for his past experience with the risky game.

Solemn Saul heaved a doleful sigh, as a little laugh ran around the group, and his voice sounded more dejected than ever as he spoke:

"I told ye 'twas like this, on'y more so, didn't I, gents? An' when I watched how *he* done the trick, I jest hopped onto his game with both feet o' me! Fu'st off I played 'bout even, but when I reckoned I'd ketched the full swing of it, I jest piled up my fat stock—a clean hunderd at a clip, mind ye!—ontel—waal, boss, an' you, gents, ef he left me the rags I wore, or the boots I stood in, 'twas jest because he was too modest fer to turn me loose 'thout so much to hide my nakedness from them I hed to meet afore I could git to the bresh!"

"And now you want to play even, by skinning us?"

"Jest 'nough to keep life a-goin', while I work to make good the oath I tuck, boss, jedge, an' you, gents," with a mournful sweep of his pale-blue eyes over the faces of those present, his fingers deftly manipulating the shells and little joker the while. "Fer I hed to make it—jest hed to, ye mind! 'Pears like I'd gone clean crazy up to then, thinkin' what a wuss-then-fool I'd bin, an' wonderin' ef they was any more o' my kind runnin' on the stray. An' then—it come to me in the middle watches o' the night, like the roar of a angel an' the coo-roo-oo of a suckin' dove, all stirred up in a lump! It come to me so turrible plain that I knowed I was called, an' hed to go! An' so the vow jest made itself, an' signed me to it, an'—hyar I be, boss, jedge, an' you-all, gents: the livin' advertisement of a 'Sylum fer Fools, bound to keep peggin' away ontel the money is raised fer to build it, from coal-hole up to sky-parlor, from front-door-plate through to back-door-swill-bucket! An' all by these—dug-gun 'em, double-times-over!"

"Nickels, dimes an' dollars! The more ye put down, the less ye'll ever take up! Ye can't win ef ye don't bet, an' ef ye quit eatin' ontel ye make yer pile bettin' ag'inst 'nother man's game, a dollar'd buy out the biggest 'vision dealer in Hungrytown!"

"Hyar she am, an' thar she goes! Over an' under, up-stairs an' down sullar, then sashayin' through the middle; all with a twist o' the wrist an' a flirt o' the fingers as'll make yer own eyes tell ye lies! Now ye see it, an' now ye don't, while ye reckon ye *do*! Ef ye resk yer good money on the say-so ef yer judgment, the fools hain't all dead yit, an' one of 'em boards with your landlady! Fer I'm bound to cheat ye ef I kin, gentlemen! It's part o' the game, an' part o' the cuss that I've got to give ye all fa'r warnin' afore I let ye plunge to the turrible extent o' one round dollar! I've got to cheat ye; but,

what's the odds, sence you're bound to win, even ef ye lose?"

"The profit of cheaply bought experience, eh?" drawled Chadwick.

"That's throwed in to make weight, but the prize hain't fer him as is too smart to buck ag'inst 'nother man's game, an' I reckon I'm wastin' the breath o' me tryin'—fingers ag'inst eyes, an' a big round dollar says you can't on-kiver the little joker, boss!"

More because his friend really appeared to be amused if not interested by that lugubrious knight of the shells, Horace Bolster placed a dollar on one corner of the little velvet table, then picked up one of the shells, joining in the laugh which followed. Of course the "little joker" was not there, although he could almost have taken oath his keen eyes had kept faithful tracks of the rubber pea through all its swift changes.

"Lost ag'in, an' I kin name the pocket that's got the tin!" dolefully croaked Solemn Saul, as the silver dollar vanished from sight.

"That leaves it even chances," quickly cried Chadwick, arresting the fakir's hand as it was about to resume its work with the shells. "A dollar goes that I can turn up the little joker!"

"Dollar goes—into my pocket!" mournfully nodded Sunday. "The 'Sylum fer Fools' 'll be so much the richer, an' ef *you* hain't a dollar wiser, I can't help it! Fa'r warnin', jedge! I'm cheatin' of ye, an' ye *can't* win, beca'se—"

"Dollar goes that I turn up the little joker!" called out Chadwick, at the same time picking up both of the remaining shells; to have his chuckle of triumph die away as the velvet table showed bare!

"Dollar's gone, an' hyar comes little joker fer to thank the good jedge in the name o' the 'Sylum!' croaked Solemn Saul, turning his hand and letting the black pea drop from where it had hidden between two of his bony fingers. "I hed to cheat ye, fer that goes with the game; but fer every dollar won, I give a 'stiffkit' that'll be a ticket o' 'mission to the 'Sylum' when it's finished, whar every member'll hev a garden to—"

That professionally glib tongue seemed to lose its way, and the man with the shells shrunk back from Hugh Chadwick, like one affrighted by that abrupt change of countenance. And, as he noted that sudden pallor, that almost wild stare of those big brown eyes, Solemn Saul deftly slipped shells and little joker into his bosom, then closed his ingenious table with a rapid twist of the wrist.

He saw that the judge was staring toward the open door which afforded admittance to the saloon, and as he glanced that way himself, he caught an indistinct glimpse of a tall, burly shape just beyond the threshold, then—

"Take it, durn ye, hog!" snarled a savage voice, the last words blending with the sharp report of a revolver as the fellow strode forward; and with a hoarse cry, Hugh Chadwick reeled back against the bar.

CHAPTER II.

AT THE MERCY OF A MOB.

OF all those present, Saul Sunday alone seemed capable of prompt and decisive action.

Horace Bolster had eyes and thoughts only for his friend, while the others plainly attributed that ugly change to anger at being so openly cheated: a belief which was only strengthened by the swift recoil on the fakir's part.

Instead, this was simply to gain space for swinging his metal-bound staff, which went whizzing across the saloon the second those pale blue eyes caught sight of that armed hand.

Too late to check the shot, the staff struck the intruder squarely in the stomach, causing him to drop the smoking revolver, and doubling him up like a closing jack-knife, just as a dark figure sprung forward from the rear, striking those bent shoulders and hurling the assassin headlong into the middle of the room.

"Hope I don't intrude, gentlemen!" panted the second man, saving himself from sharing that fall by a desperate effort, at the same time flinging up an empty hand and crying: "Flag o' truce, all here!"

"Down him!" snarlingly cried Horace Bolster, springing to the side of the judge and lending the support his failing limbs sorely needed just then. "Take him alive, though! He's murdered the judge!"

With a roar, and a flood of excited curses, those present broke the spell which had fallen over them, surging forward to fairly fall upon that struggling shape, pinning it to the floor by mere weight of numbers.

"Let up, cuss ye all!" panted the fellow, fighting like a wild beast against the odds, though so hopelessly. "I'll kill him! I've a right to kill the durned—let up, or—*augh-gh-gh!*"

Solemn Saul sprung across the saloon, keeping clear of the ruck, snatching up his staff and giving it a menacing quiver as he flashed a suspicious look into the face of the man who had helped bring about that downfall.

"Stiddy, critter! Ef you're pard o' his'n, I'll thump ye at a wink!"

"Does this look like it?" turning those open palms toward him. "I tried my level best to

hinder the shot, but I didn't sight him in time, and had too much space to cover. Who is he, and what— Hit him, sure as fate!" breaking off with sudden sharpness in his tones as he saw Race Bolster snatch at the dampened towel which his barkeeper handed him, to stain it scarlet with the blood which trickled down one side of that pale face.

"Brace up, Hughey, old pard! You're not killed—you're not hurt so mighty bad—you can't be, I say!" exclaimed his friend, hardly conscious of the words he uttered.

"Don't—don't let him—" gasped Chadwick, one hand closing over the towel and keeping it pressed tightly to his wound as he broke from that friendly arm, shrinking toward the corner where the counter joined the wall, a look of dazed terror in his eyes, strange to see in a man who had won the right to be called a "chief," more times than one, since his coming to Gopher Slope.

"Easy, pard!" soothingly muttered Bolster. "He can't do any more hurt. The boys have nailed him fast. Who is it, fellows?"

"Hungry Mike Dobson—no less!" came a response, as a hand shot forth from that tangle to grasp the coil of small rope which the barkeeper provided, just then.

"Hungry fer—I'll hev his heart's blood!" snarled the still struggling assassin. "Let up, cuss ye all fer dogs! I said I'd play even, an' now—let up I say!"

But, strange to say, Hugh Chadwick was staring like one half-dazed, not at that writhing mass where his assailant lay buried from sight, but toward—was it Solemn Saul Sunday, or could it have been the latest comer, whose empty hands were still held conspicuously above his head?

"Ef his two eyes don't say *you*, stranger, I'll chaw my hat!" muttered Sunday, in tones barely loud enough for those ears to catch. "Play mild, or I'll see the sort o' fillin' thar's under the hat o' ye?"

"Then this is a lunatic asylum?" declared the stranger, with the ghost of a sneer on his bearded face. "Or, is it a crime in Gopher Slope for one man to attempt saving the life of another?"

"Savin' ain't takin', an' I'm tryin' to hope ye kin prove you've got hold of the right word, stranger. Ef so, you're all hunky, but ef not—waal, I reckon there's a tree stout 'nough to hold up two sech critters—I do so!"

With so many strong and willing hands at work, and others coming on the scene with each passing moment, attracted by the shot and the sounds of a struggle, it did not take much longer to thoroughly bind Hungry Mike Dobson, as the would-be assassin had been named. And then, physically exhausted as he must have been by that terrible struggle against odds, the fellow poured forth a vicious flood of curses against the man whose life he had done his level best to claim.

Hugh Chadwick leaned against the angle formed by bar and wall, one hand pressing the stained towel to his head, the other mechanically baffling the anxious friend who wished to inspect his wound. That strangely dazed expression still filled his eyes, but now they seemed fascinated by that inflamed visage, from the mouth of which poured such fiercely bitter words and curses.

"I didn't—have a show!" he gasped, as Hungry Mike paused to catch breath. "Why, Mike, what made—I've treated him clean white, gentlemen," staring dully from face to face, his shivering renewed as a pair of dark eyes met his.

"You lie, Hugh Chadwick!" exploded Dobson, fiercely striving to burst his bonds as he lay on the floor. "You never had a man workin' fer ye that ye didn't do him all over dirt! An' as fer a show—what sort o' show did ye give the pard ye cheated out o' Neverfail Min? What show did ye give Cy Whitfield or Bart Clough, or—"

"Stop him!" gasped the judge, only saved from sinking to the floor in a nerveless heap by the strong arms of Race Bolster. "My head! Oh, it's going! It's flying—hold it on, Race! Don't let—don't—"

"Stamp on his mouth if he don't hold hush!" commanded Bolster, over a shoulder, then turning once more to his friend. "We'll hang him, pard, out of hand, if you think—"

"I can't think! My head is—hold it on, Race! It's flying off like— Take me away—take me—away to—die in—"

His voice died away in a husky rattle, and believing him at the point of death, Race Bolster hastily called for help. A dozen pair of hands offered, but ordering all save one stout friend to fall back and give the injured man air, Bolster supported that drooping head against his shoulder, muttering:

"Take his legs—easy! To my room—better there!"

"Tell the devil I sent ye!" snarled Hungry Mike, with reckless ferocity, as his bloodshot eyes followed the trio, slowly moving through the saloon, to ascend a flight of stairs which led to the private chamber of the proprietor.

That was an unfortunate taunt for the bound man, if he really hoped to escape speedy punishment, since it changed low mutterings into open

calls for a rope and hanging; and if there had been an acknowledged leader present, just then, the end would have been swift as sure.

No one else had thought for the man who had sent Hungry Mike headlong through the open door, and he turned a half-appealing look upon the gaunt face of Saul Sunday as he muttered:

"I'm not obliged to hold up all night, am I, friend? If so, you might as well kill a fellow outright, as tire him to death!"

"Then—you really hain't that critter's pard?"

"Never laid eyes on him before he pulled his gun, true as my name is B. Bragg, from Blissful Buttes! I just chipped in, hoping it might give me a lift in starting my boom, but—fair warning, stranger! Down comes my dukes, if I do the same!"

"You talk white—prove it, ef ye kin!" grimly muttered Solemn Saul, striding forward and joining the circle of excited men gathered around the bound rough. "I say gentlemen! Mebbe I'm barkin' on the wrong scent, but, is it jest right fer to hang a critter afore it's made clear that he's done murder?"

"Who are you that chips?" demanded a fierce voice, as one of the later comers wheeled to face the man of the shells. "Didn't he drop the judge, without giving him a word of warning?"

"Didn't the jedge squeeze me clean o' all I've spent forty year' scrapin' together?" viciously retorted Dobson. "Didn't he soft-soap me into 'vestin' all I had into one o' his mines, jest to freeze me out the quicker? An' when I went to him, beggin' like a dog, didn't he jest laugh at a fool, an' tell me to skip, afore he kicked me out?"

"Hello! what's the racket in here?" and the crowd slightly recoiled before a tall, muscular figure that strode across the threshold, pausing with hands on his hips, very close to the brace of revolvers he bore at his belt. "Who's hurt, and why was it? Speak up one who knows it all!"

"It's Hungry Mike, and he's shot the judge for—"

"Chadwick? Didn't kill him?" with a flashing glance around the saloon. "How did it start, and who's to blame?"

A dozen voices, among them that of Dobson, began to tell the story, but each word seemed to add fresh fuel to the fire that already raged fiercely, and all was drowned in that most terrible of all human sounds: the cry for blood!

David Arnold, by virtue of his office as city marshal, promptly interposed as a dozen eager hands fastened upon the prisoner to drag him out to meet his death, and, emboldened by this appeal for law and order, both Sunday and Bragg added their plea for time and consideration.

"Ef it hedn't bin fer both o' us, mind ye, Hungry could 'a' filled the jedge chuck full o' lead, afore the rest o' ye could 'a' done more then wonder what was busted loose. An' so—ef only to give the jedge a fa'r shake, gentlemen, an' let him see the critter as killed him do his dance on wind, I say ag'in: wait! Wait ontel—"

"Oh, go hang yourself, and save us the trouble!" growled one of the foremost in demanding a short shrift and a long rope. "And as for you, Dave Arnold, if you can't stomach such speedy justice, go hunt a barrel to stick your head in to do your preaching! Am I right, boys?"

"You're mighty right! Yank him out, an' we'll give him comp'ny to kick 'longside of, ef ary dug-gun fool tries to hender!"

"But, gentlemen—"

"Buts don't pass, Dave Arnold," grimly assured the tall fellow, one hand pushing the marshal back from the doomed wretch. "Follow my advice, and save your wind, marshal. Your term isn't near out, and we can't afford another election so soon. Fall back or—go aloft, David!"

"Cain't we rush 'em, boss?" muttered Sunday, edging nearer the discomfited official as he reluctantly fell back. "Pick the men you kin count on, an' we'll back ye up to the last-notch!"

The marshal hesitated, but already Hungry Mike was being dragged to his feet and shoved toward the open door, struggling doggedly but vainly. Arnold was hardly a coward, but even a truly brave man might well have shrunk from daring the deadly rage of that rapidly growing mob.

"We can't; I'll go for help, and maybe we can call the turn," he answered, slipping through the door, left clear by the surging mass, and vanishing from sight of the disgusted fakir.

"Don't reckon it's much use, friend," said Bragg, as they likewise left the saloon, "but if you say so, I'm game to make a try for it!"

"We'd fetch up under a limb, dead shore!" growled Sunday, uneasily, yet keeping along with the rear of the crowd. "You wouldn't git sech a fool notion into the head o' ye, ef you'd see'd as many sech gangs in a rope stampe as I hev—no ye wouldn't, now!"

By this time, though only a few minutes had elapsed since the firing of that shot, it seemed as though all Gopher Slope had caught the contagion, and each new-comer lustily joined in the cry for blood.

All earthly hope for the prisoner apparently was lost; yet, even then his rough courage did not entirely desert him, and he fought desperately against being hurried to the hanging-tree, cursing at and reviling his captors as no craven could have done under like circumstances. But when nearly through the town, his voice changed, and he gave vent to a shrill, peculiarly modulated call, swiftly repeating it twice at brief intervals.

CHAPTER III.

A PUZZLE FOR RACE BOLSTER.

WITHOUT so much as a single glance backward to note the disposition made of Hungry Mike Dobson, Horace Bolster assisted in carrying Hugh Chadwick through the saloon, then up the flight of stairs leading to the second story, where he had his private retreat, into which only the closest of intimates were ever introduced.

For a man of the world, as Bolster rather prided himself on being, the Bon Ton Sport was extraordinarily worked up over this affair; and his heart could hardly have felt worse had he been aiding a dearly loved brother, or other close relative.

"Steady, Blattmacher!" he growled, as a slight misstep on the part of his assistant caused a jar which drew a moan of pain from the lips of the judge, who hung so limply across their hands. "Brace up, Hughey, man! We'll soon have you safe to rights, old fellow!"

"I didn't—shot down like—never a show!" moaned the injured man, shivering through every fiber of his being.

"Satan roast him for doing it!"

"Vhell, I reckon he gids those shance, dot Sadan, eh?" puffed Blattmacher, whose will was a vast deal better than his wind. "I giffs me not so mooch as a benny his neck for, *dis* dime—nein!"

"My head! Catch it, Race!" gasped Chadwick, with a start that came dangerously near causing a fall in company. "Don't let it—I never knew—murdered, and never a chance to lift a finger!"

Opening the door at the head of the stairs with a thrust of his foot, Race Bolster took his first free breath when that little room was crossed and the injured speculator found a temporary resting-place on the narrow but comfortable bed where the Bon Ton Sport passed his few sleeping hours.

"Wait, Blattmacher," he urged, in a hasty aside, as the corpulent German drew back, puffing and panting. "You know something about such things, and if there's any show at all, why—easy, Hughey, pard!" his arm closing about the judge with friendly force, just in time to keep him from striking the floor.

"Don't, Mike! Wait until—I'm not afraid of your gun, but—like a dog, and never a show!"

There was a brief struggle, but before the ponderous German could fairly get into motion, Race Bolster succeeded in bearing the stricken mine-owner back upon the bed, talking soothingly to him, much as a loving father might talk to a querulous child who persists in doing what can only injure itself.

At times the judge seemed to comprehend what was said to him, but oftener not. And through all ran that curious fear concerning his head.

"Don't touch it!" he gasped, as Bolster tried to remove the blood-stained towel which the injured man still held pressed to his hurt. "It'll fly off! It's going—hold it on, man! If I lose it, how can I— Don't, Mike! I never hurt—shot! murdered, like a cur! And I never had—even a penknife!"

"He vhas gone crazy like a pedpoog! Mein Gott in himmell! vhat a peesness, vhat a peesness is all dose!"

Race Bolster kept the excitable German at bay by a dexterous use of his heels, for his own excitement was not too great for him to see that Hugh Chadwick seemed even more sensitive to Blattmacher's touch than to that of his old friend.

As yet, all he knew was that the bullet sped by Hungry Mike Dobson had struck the mine magnate on the head, not far from the right temple. He had feared the worst from the instant he caught sight of the flowing blood, but now—surely a dying man could not be so strong!

Reviving hope lent him courage, and once more he strove to gain a fair view of that wound; but he only partly succeeded. With a mean and a writhing twist, Chadwick freed his hand and once more pressed the towel to his head, crying:

"Don't let—stop 'em, Race! They're unscrewing my—who hit me? What had I done to—"

"Not a blessed thing, Hughey, mate," soothingly interjected the Bon Ton Sport, with a frowning shake of his head toward Blattmacher. "'Twas all an accident, and you'll never know anything hurt ye, by morning, if you'll only let me look—"

"Look out! he's pulled a gun, and—don't, Mike! Give a man a show for—my head! my head!"

"Vhell, vhell! If I effer, I neffer didt!" exploded the German, his little eyes almost popping from their fat-encircled sockets. "A ped-

poog vhasn't somewhere as gombarison! He vhas gone deadt already, off he didn't vhas kick so loudt!"

Chadwick suddenly rose to a sitting posture on the bed, his one visible eye glaring wildly at the honest German, his left hand stealing behind him as though in quest of a weapon or missile of some sort. His fingers closed on the pillow, then the case of feathers flew forward, to strike the German fairly in the face, while the injured man hoarsely exclaimed:

"Scat, you vampire! Turn him out, Race! Don't let—my head! It's flying off like a—catch it, pard! Don't let it fall down that—stop up that hole, man! If it falls down there—ah-h!"

"Go, Heinrich!" hastily whispered Bolster, as he lowered that suddenly collapsing figure down upon the bed once more. "Hunt up Doc, and tell him it's a case of life and death! Go—fetch him back, if you have to carry him in your arms, man!"

"I pring him eafen off I can't vindt him—sure!"

"Don't talk—not a circus—" muttered Chadwick, his eyes closing, his tense muscles relaxing.

"Slip out the back way, if Doc isn't there," added Bolster, with ready comprehension. "Don't let on—don't answer any questions if asked, but—lively, Heinrich! A minute now, is worth a year later!"

"Shut—lock door after—circus—"

Bolster guessed at the meaning, and turned the key after Blattmacher left the room, throwing the bolts at top and bottom. Just then there was no trouble too great or too fanciful for him to take for his suffering friend.

Hugh lay like a corpse, save for his faint breathing, and he no longer resisted the friendly hand that sought to remove the blood-marked towel. A slight shiver agitated his muscular frame as the finger of the Bon Ton Sport gently probed the wound, and his lids lifted in time to catch the puzzled look which partially drove away that expression of friendly fear.

"What is it, Race?" the judge faintly asked.

"Not—I'm booked?"

"Not a bit of it, Hugh, old rocks! Why, if it wasn't for—I can't puzzle it out, and that's flat!"

"I feel better, and—drink—"

Bolster sprung across the room to a little recess in the wall, quickly returning with bottle and glass in hand; but the judge caught the former and held it to his lips, rising in bed as he did so. He did indeed appear to be better, and that draught of strong liquor seemed exactly what he needed to brace up his shaken nerves, for, as he relinquished the bottle, he drew a long breath, then muttered:

"I feel like a new man, pardner! I thought—did I talk wildly, Race? How came I here? What—oh, yes; I know. Dobson shot at me. His lead knocked me crazy, but I'm better—much better!"

"Of course you're all right, Hugh; but, don't try to talk. Lie down, and try to sleep. I've sent for Doc, and after he has—"

"Don't let him in, Race! I'm all right, if—what's that?" giving a start as ominous shouts were heard below.

"It's nothing to worry over, Hugh, man," urged Bolster, though he felt morally certain Hungry Mike Dobson was being dragged away to pay the penalty for a life which he had not yet taken. "Mebbe some o' the sports are bouncing that thimble-rigger for skinning 'em."

"Who is he? And that other fellow?" asked Chadwick, as he drew his friend closer. "The one who upset Dobson? The man with eyes—with brown or black eyes, and sandy beard?"

"I didn't see. I had eyes and thoughts only for you, pardner, just then; but if you want to know—"

"If you only would, Race!" his eyes glittering feverishly, as his grip tightened on that arm. "I may be wrong, but I almost know it was a put-up job to down me for keeps, and those two—the man with the shells, and the man with eyes like—with dark eyes, I mean! They were surely playing in with Hungry Mike!"

If Chadwick had not exhibited so many signs of a sorely disordered brain, the sturdy sport would have flatly contradicted that final assertion, even at the risk of a quarrel with his friend; for he was honest enough as the world goes, and he had at least a shrewd suspicion that Solemn Saul had been quick enough with his staff to turn sure death into only a scalp-wound.

Before he could speak, ugly sounds came to their ears, muffled by passing through those walls, but far too distinct for misapprehension on their part, wild yells of excited men, mingling with the rapid explosion of firearms!

"What is it? Not Hungry Mike?"

"He's mixed up in it, dead sure!" grimly assured Bolster, his head bent in acute listening, even while he added: "Reckon he's managed to make a break for life, but—"

"Think they've shot him down?"

"Sure, if they couldn't hold him any other way!"

"I'm sorry, though he tried to murder me like—you'll bear me out so far, Race. You

know I didn't have a gun—didn't have time to face him squarely, even!"

"I know, and so does all Gopher Slope, by this," soothingly returned the Bon Ton Sport. "If Hungry is downed, to stay, there'll be a general jubilee over it to-morrow."

"I'm going, don't try to stop me, man!" with a touch of irritation in his tones as Bolster mechanically tried to check his rising from the bed. "Maybe I can save him, yet! I hold no grudge—he must have thought he had cause to—I tell you, Race, I'm all right!"

"Let me go with you, at least, Hugh, pard."

"No. I'm going home. Send the doctor after me, if he comes. And—say you'll find out for me just who and what those two fellows are?"

"I never laid eyes on either one before this night, Hugh, but I'll do my level best to bring 'em to book, if you say so."

"I do ask it," steadying himself on his feet, then tightly knotting the damp towel about his head. "I believe they're part of a foul plot to down me—to cheat me out of the Neverfail! But, don't let 'em have a chance to know I'm after 'em, pard! I can depend on you?"

"Through thick and thin, Hugh. I'm going to see you safe home, for a starter, though!"

"No: just let me out the back way. I'm not fit to be seen, and you want to keep an eye on those fellows, remember! Don't lose a minute more than you can help, if you love me, Race!"

With undisguised reluctance the Bon Ton Sport helped his friend down-stairs and out of the building by a rear passage, watching him long enough to make fairly sure he had recovered from that shock sufficiently to be in little risk of a collapse before gaining his own house. In fact, the judge walked wondrously brisk and steadily for a man who had so recently been in the very grip of grim death!

"It gets me—gets me bad!" muttered Bolster, drawing a long breath, and slowly shaking his head as he ceased to dog his friend further on his way. "One minute crazy as a bedbug, the next—if I didn't know Hugh's clean white, I'd be almost tempted to think he'd been playing me dirt!"

The judge knew nothing of this friendly espionage, but pressed rapidly on toward his house, pausing at the front to remove that bloody bandage, casting it into a patch of bushes close at hand. None too soon was he rid of that telltale witness, for the front door opened and Polly Maydew, his housekeeper, briskly said:

"Man waiting for you inside, judge!"

"Who is it?" gruffly asked Chadwick, entering the building.

"Hellow, boss!" came a coarse voice through an opening door.

"Bart Clough!" gasped Chadwick, shrinking back as though in fear.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BOOMER FROM BLISSFUL BUTTES.

SCARCELY had Hungry Mike Dobson uttered that cry, when the sharp clatter of a horse's hoofs on the flinty ground attracted the notice of those nearest that point, giving them time to step aside to escape actual contact with the recklessly ridden animal.

"Hello, gents!" cried the rider, leaping forward in his saddle as though for a closer look at the hampered man who was being hurried to an ignominious death. "What's the pepper-gram to-night?"

Before an answer could be given, his horse gave a snort of pain or affright, plunging forward and scattering those who had Hungry Mike in charge. And then—it all took place with such bewildering rapidity that none of the actors could, or would, ever give anything like a clear description of the rescue.

For rescue it surely was!

Two stout fellows picked Hungry Mike up in their arms, with a heave and a toss, setting him fairly astride the horse whose fierce plunges had cleared sufficient space for their performance, then ducking and plunging into the bewildered crowd, aided by the darkness in losing their identity, so far as the really earnest lynchers were concerned.

The bold rider flung the doubled loop of a lariat over the head and shoulders of Hungry Mike, drawing him tightly to his own back by that means, and guarding against his being thrown off by the sudden leap of the spirited animal as keen spurs raked his flanks.

"Good-by, gents!" recklessly laughed the daring rescuer, as he sped away from the dumfounded lynchers. "May you all be at Satan's bar when the last call comes!"

"Stop 'em! Shoot 'em! A rescue!" yelled half a score of the lynchers, furious now that they comprehended the daring trick.

Pistols were drawn and fired, though already but little more than that mocking laugh, and the rapidly-receding clatter of hoofs remained to guide their shots. Raging like madmen, the mob rushed on, only to scatter and slacken their pace as they gained the outskirts of the scattered town, for even so soon they had lost all clew to their intended victim and his rescuer.

"A put-up job!" howled the poor fellow who had so significantly invited Marshal Arnold to refrain from interfering. "Rally to me, all

honest citizens! Count noses, then try for the rogues! I'd give a hand to know who hustled me, just as I had those devils lined!"

"Waal, I don't reckon we're bankerin' fer any too big a bite o' that kind o' pie!" muttered Solemn Saul Sunday, falling back in place of pressing forward, as that fierce cry arose. "I kin grunt with the rest, when I hev to, but I wasn't born a hog!"

"Look out that they don't go for your bacon, then!" laughed Bragg, springing forward, and only pausing when he stood shoulder to shoulder with the tall fellow. "Me, too, fellow-citizens! I'll give the freedom of Blissful Buttes to any man who'll name the knaves who helped cheat justice!"

"Who're you that crows so mighty brash?" demanded the tall fellow, hand on pistol. "Seems like I remember you as standing up for Hungry Mike, back at the Bon Ton."

"Touch lightly, friend!" admonished Bragg, as a hand closed viciously on his arm. "That's my limb, and the same one that sent Hungry Mike kissing the floor back yonder! All the same, I'll kiss the book and make oath I never lifted hand nor foot to aid Hungry Mike in cheating the rope, if—Who's got a Bible handy?"

It takes but a trifle to change rage to mirth, curses to laughter, at a certain stage of a mob's progress; and a roar of mingled mirth and mockery greeted that seemingly earnest query. But the tall fellow was not so easily diverted from a line once taken, and he growled:

"That's all right, maybe, but who are you? I never saw you before, to my knowledge."

"And you'll never see me behind, when it's white men to the front!" asseverated the stranger, doffing his hat and making a circular sweep which included all within range of his keen eyes.

"Know me, Gopher Slopers! Bouncer Bragg, just from Blissful Buttes, that land overflowing with honey and unending delight! The most glorious section of an unparalleled—Did you speak, dear sir?"

"Curse your chatter! It's action we want, just now!"

"Action? Just show me when, and how, and whither, dear fellow, and if I don't out-act Owen O'Connor and Cupid Diss de Bar combined, I'll never call for a shekel when the gentleman in white perambulates! Act? If you don't believe I'm an actor, just send a dispatch to Blissful Buttes as to my qualifications!"

"You'll get a dispatch—over the range, through this!" with a grim flourish of his revolver. "See you later, and if you can't read your title clear when I call for it, up a tree you'll go, as substitute for Hungry Mike!"

"I'll try to be at home when you call, gentle stranger," blandly acquiesced Bouncer Bragg, seemingly never a whit daunted, but backing away from the central position he had occupied without invitation. "When you're ready to act, in place of spouting, dear sir, count on Bouncer Bragg, the Boomer from Blissful Buttes!"

By this time even that hot-headed fellow began to realize how utterly vain would be any further effort to recapture the fugitive, while night covered his doublings; but to "let himself down easily," he cheered his followers on to renewed search.

"Satisfied, ain't ye, critter?" croaked Solemn Saul, in his doleful tones, as he joined the Boomer when that superficial search slackened. "Sufferin' gran'pap! ef I didn't begin fer to snuffle the prayers o' me when—Easy, critter!" jerking back as Bragg gripped an arm with a flourish of his free hand. "None o' your dum stage-actorin' over the likes o' me, now!"

"You're just the gentleman I was looking for, sir! Not on my own account, but for your own. Pardon me if I touch on the raw, but aren't you just a bit down on your luck at present?"

"Luck?" moaned the Sad Man, his gaunt figure growing limp and nerveless. "Be they ary sech a word, stranger? Time was—but time hain't no longer! I'm all broke up, an' weighed down by a cuss—I say, pardner!" bringing his metal-bound staff to the front and fumbling in his bosom, as though to produce the other implements essential to his craft. "I'm workin' up a 'Sylum fer Fools, an' ef you'll bet a dollar on the little joker, I'm got a ticket o' 'mission that'll vide ye with a safe an' happy home when you git too mighty foolish to be let run 'stray like a maverick. An' so—"

"Happy home?" echoed the Boomer, with his nose high in air as he struck an attitude. "Why, my poor wanderer in outer darkness, haven't I a mortgage on never-ending peace and contentment? Didn't you hear me say—but I'll repeat, rather than lose—Hold on, my dear fellow!"

"Sufferin' Jemima to miseryation! but I cain't" spluttered the Man of the Shells, skurrying away through the darkness. "Comin', sir, boss, your Honor!" in response to an imaginary summons.

"Me too!" laughed Bouncer Bragg, in rapid pursuit. "Stop, gentle stranger! Do you want those irritable citizens to mistake you for the rope candidate? Tarry yet a little, while I sing in your mournful ears the sweet song of Blissful Buttes!"

"I say, pardner," exploded Solemn Saul, pausing and peering keenly into that bearded face as best he could by the indistinct light of the stars. "What lay be ye on—honest?"

"The lay of the golden egg, and you can crack the shell for your own profit," came the ready response, as his arm linked into that of the thimble-rigger. "Golgug this way? So am I! Always makes me thirsty, joining in the hue and cry, and Bon Ton just hits my caliber! Proud to make your acquaintance, my dear sir! What did you say your name was?"

"Mournful Jemima!" groaned the Sad Man, once more limp, and the personification of hopelessness.

"Romantic, if not exactly cheerful!" nodded the Boomer, keeping pace with his present victim. "All right! Once you've fairly struck Blissful Buttes, you'll change your name to Jubilate Jemima."

"Sufferin' gran'pap!"

"Him too, and I'll bunch the family at lower rates, if they count up half a dozen or over. How many did you say, Jemima?"

"I'm clean past sayin'—wuss luck to the two ears o' me!"

"Poor fellow!" with a sympathetic sigh. "Colic, or cholera-morbus? That's one additional advantage Blissful Buttes has over all the rest of the world, my dear sir, for all such miserable ailments can't stand even a single whiff of her delicious, healthful, all-healing climate; and—"

With a vigorous jerk, Sunday freed his arm and took to his heels, closely chased by Bouncer Bragg. Saul dodged into the Bon Ton Saloon, just in time to come face to face with Horace Bolster, as he returned from watching Hugh Chadwick safely on his way home.

"What's the matter with you?" sternly demanded the sport, and Sunday, catching at the uppermost words, spluttered out:

"The jedge—how's he flourishin', boss?"

"Better than I dared hope, and safely on his way home, by now. You saved his life, stranger," his voice softening as he recognized the hero of the shells.

"Me too!" cried the Bouncer, entering the saloon a little more decorously, just in time to make the most of the opening offered. "Of course a gentleman couldn't even think of asking pay for saving the precious life of another gentleman, but only an idiot casts it over his shoulder when he sees a legitimate chance to work up business—and such business! Why, my gentle sir, if you'll believe me, I'm a universal benefactor, with a precious Gospel to preach, and—"

"Everlastin' grief, an' ee-tarnal dejection!" moaned Solemn Saul, bringing up against the bar. "Call a hearse, an' book me fer the 'Sylum, I beg o' ye, gents!"

"And hence, not as a reward of merit, you comprehend, dear sir," pursued Bouncer Bragg, after a single withering glance at the Sad Man. "Not as payment for doing my bounden duty, but as an aid to all poor devils down on their luck, my gentle stranger, may I beg permission to convert one of yonder card-tables into a rostrum, from the apex of which I may spread abroad the glorious tidings which—ahem?"

"You've got something you want to sell?" hesitated Bolster, with a keen glance slowly sweeping over the glib talker, from crown to sole. "Or, is it another skin game?"

"Sell? Skin? Why, my benighted soul—mine, not yours, of course, dear sir," bowing low with hand over heart and a bland smile irradiating his countenance as he added: "But why talk twice, when once ought to be sufficient? May I presume?"

Without pausing for an answer, Bouncer Bragg sprung upon the nearest table, doffing his hat and bowing low to the amused if wondering audience gathered inside the saloon.

"Know thyself, gentlemen, is a wise maxim, but to know Bouncer Bragg, Esq., the Boomer of Blissful Buttes is a liberal education in itself! And so, behold me, if not in all my glory, at least in the full and conscientious discharge of my glorious duty! And why 'glorious?' There by hangs a tale, which I'll proceed to unfold until each sinuous crook becomes straight as a string, and true as a die!"

"I am here, gentlemen—by which term I not only include all within these four walls, but all who are now entering, and those who are yet on their toilsome way—I am here, I say, not for my own glory or pecuniary profit, but to shower blessings on such of my race who have eyes to see, and ears to hear, with wit enough to improve the golden opportunity before it gives them the dirty shake—so to speak!"

"I am here as the sounding trumpet elected by Blissful Buttes, to offer the homeless a home, the poor riches, the unhappy undying peace and changeless contentment! And what do I ask in return for all this? The merest trifle in the world, gentlemen! I do not ask a thousand dollars. I do not ask a hundred—nor fifty—nor even a single wretched image of the flopping buzzard, as I've known others to do, who cannot offer the millionth part of what I not only offer, but give—for gift it is, gentlemen all! Yet a gift so precious, so pure, so free from the faintest suspicion of alloy, that the most fastidious

need never hang back lest their proud honor be humiliated by a sense of unpaid-for obligation."

"Why, gentlemen all—by which I include those bashful ones whom I hear lingering just beyond the threshold," smiling blandly as he turned on the table-top to face the open door.

His glib speech progressed no further, for a missile whizzed through the air, exploding as it struck, and the Boomer fell blindly backward!

CHAPTER V.

AN ENIGMATICAL PARTY, NAMED SMITH.

SENDING back those jeering words and that mocking laugh, the bold rescuer rode swiftly away through the gloom, but with all his apparent recklessness, he was not above aiding fortune as far as lay in his power.

"Supple your backbone, Hungry!" he enjoined. "Flatten out as best you can and if you do stop a chunk of lead, grit your teeth and say nothing, for my sake, if not for your own!"

He bent low along the withers of his horse, keeping the doubled lariat tightly stretched, as Dobson followed suit as far as possible. Bullets were whizzing viciously past them, but as yet not a single missile had found its billet in human flesh or animal.

"Steady! and forget to whimper!" added the rescuer, as he turned the horse to the right at a sharp angle. "If those imps even think they've drawn blood, they'll hang to the trail like grim death to—Steady, boy!"

The horse gave both riders a severe shaking-up, through stepping on a loose stone and almost pitching headlong; but, recovering itself with cat-like agility, the good animal sped onward, seemingly none the worse for its mishap.

A few swift strides in the new direction, then the animal struck softer ground, its hoofs no longer giving forth so distinct an invitation to flying lead, and Hungry Mike felt that flattened back beginning to arch beneath him.

"Rise up, William Henry! I'm fond of bug-ging as the next man, but you suit me too mighty well! I reckon—not hit, are you?"

"Hain't hed time to feel, sca'cely, but lifting his body, permitting his rescuer to rise erect in the saddle, "who be ye, anyway?"

"Your file-leader, just at present, Hungry, and if those wasteful varlets back yonder should drop to the trick, I'm hoping you'll keep strictly in line, too! I love you like a brother, Michael, of course, but I admire the integrity of my own pelt a mighty sight more!"

"You hain't—not the boss?"

"I am what fortune made me, Hungry! Now button up, if you ruin a boiler!"

That hasty interchange took place during the few seconds in which the angry mob was at a loss, but as the narrow strip of soft soil was crossed, keen ears once more caught the clatter of hoofs, and again the night was fitfully illuminated by exploding firearms.

Still, it was random practice, and the bold rescuer did not even alter the course his horse was taking, knowing that only blind chance could wing a bullet true enough to work them injury, while each passing moment was helping them beyond pistol-range.

"Rather lucky you kicked up your racket before the moon climbed out of bed, Hungry!" chuckled his preserver, with a slight nod of the head toward the east, where the twinkling stars were beginning to pale. "Half an hour later would have made it mighty risky practice, now I'm telling you, man! As it is—steady, boy!"

The scattering town was left fairly behind them, and feeling reasonably safe from pursuit with the advantage already gained, he tightened the reins, bringing his good horse down to a walk, leaning to one side and turning backward the better to guess at what was going on among the baffled mob.

"Ef they ketch us up, boss, you'll hev to do the fightin' fer all two both on us!" ventured Hungry Mike, giving an uneasy twist on his warm seat.

"They're not going to catch us up, Hungry," assumed the stranger, at the same time changing their direction. "It isn't on the books that way, so never lose your fat over the not-to-be."

"Ef you'd jest cut these darn ropes, boss!"

"So you could up helm and bear down on the enemy, loaded to the muzzle with red-hot shot, Hungry? That might be big fun for you, but where would my profit come in at?"

"You—didn't you pull my neck out o' the rope?"

"From under the shadow of it, at least, Hungry."

"You didn't run the resk jest to string me up your own self?"

"What good would that do me, Michael?"

"Then—why fer not cut me loose?"

"No reason in the world, except that I'd rather have a little more ground between those hot-in-the-collar fellows and my precious self. You jumped in the face of all Gopher Slope this evening, and you might feel tempted to keep up your lick, if I turned you free so near that aggregation of tuneless howlers," laughing softly as he turned an ear to those baffled howls and curses. "Don't you reckon you can grin and bear it until—well, say until we fairly hit the stage trail?"

"Ef you want it that way, reckon I'll hev to," muttered Dobson, at the same time improving his chance to more closely inspect that face, one side of which was fairly turned toward his eager eyes. "I say—you hain't the boss!"

"Who said I was?"

"You hain't Peterson, nur yit one o' the boys as swore they'd stan' to my back ef I downed old Chad!"

"Well, does that make me any the worse, Hungry?"

"But, who be ye?" An' why did ye resk so much to save me from the rope? That's what sticks in my craw! I never laid eyes on ye afore, or they're gwine back on me now!"

"Steady, Hungry! One point at a time, and we'll pull through with heap sight fewer kinks in the skein. I'm John Smith; ever hear of that name before?"

"But, you wasn't in the 'greement?"

"Not to my knowledge, Michael. But, don't you run away with the foolish idea that I'm a modern Don Quixote, breaking a lance for every sinner of the Gines de Passamonte stripe. What I did was not so much through love for you, as hatred toward Hugh Chadwick!"

"You hate the jedge, then?"

"As holy water dislikes the foul fiend—you bet I do!" grimly nodded "John Smith," pricking their horse forward as though rapid motion alone could keep pace with his anger.

"Then I'm willin' to wait, an' take my chances!" said Dobson, with a long breath of relief. "I couldn't make it come right, fu'st-off, how you, a plum' stranger, could 'a' jumped in so slick at the old signal which—"

"Peterson taught you, on the road, eh?" chuckled John Smith, turning into the regular stage trail, and heading east once more. "Well, what's the matter with his having other pupils?"

"Then you really be one o' the old gang?"

"Not being under oath, I'm not bound to criminate myself, Hungry. You had the call down fine, I'm free to admit, but because a bottle's labeled brandy, that's no guarantee against it holding castor oil. And so, we'll just drop that point of the subject, and get down to business. You had a racket with the jedge, I understand?"

"I jest did—double-durn him all over!" came the vicious reply.

"And made a botch of it, unless I'm 'way off the trail. I know: you marked him, but hardly deep enough to call for a coffin. And so, Hungry, this region is going to be entirely too hot for your comfort!"

"Didn't I hev a right to down him?" growled Dobson, hoarsely. "Ef you knowed how he sucked me in, an' then squeeze me dry as a sponge when I couldn't lift finger to help myself! Ef you knowed—"

"Knowing something of the jedge, I can guess at the rest; and knowing him, Michael Dobson, I repeat: this section isn't big enough to hold Hugh Chadwick and the man who made him show the white feather before so many of Gopher Slope's sports!"

"He won't hev wind 'nough to crow when they string me up, anyway! I'll kill him next lick!"

"Of course you'd try hard enough, but if you count on getting such another chance, then you don't even begin to know the jedge. I know him, and that knowledge makes me repeat: your only show for life, Mike Dobson, lies in your making tracks for another section; and the further apart you make those tracks, the better will be your chances of pulling through with life in your veins!"

"I can't an' won't skip 'thout killin' old Chad!"

"You can and will, Michael Dobson," coldly declared John Smith, drawing rein and turning in his saddle far enough for their eyes to meet squarely. "If you had dropped him for good, this night, I would have killed you myself, like a steep-eating curl! And I'll kill you yet, without you take a solemn oath to skip out this very night, never come back, never to lift hand against the life of Hugh Chadwick!"

"But—I thought—" stammered the bewildered miner.

"Never mind what you thought. It's enough that I'm boss, just now, and enough that I say you've got to skip out, for good and all."

"How kin I?" with a sulky scowl. "I'm clean broke. They tuck away my guns. I hain't got even—"

"What's the matter with playing even, then?" laughed John Smith, his tone changing to suit. "Chadwick skinned you, why not skin Chad?"

"But—you said—"

"Never mind what I have said, so long as you give ear to what I'm going to say," once more setting the horse in motion. "Maybe you've been too busy to take note of the fact, but the stage is late, this trip. It's over-due a good two hours, but I reckon it must be pretty close at hand, by this time."

Hungry Mike gave a start, but managed to choke back the words that rose in his throat. More than ever he was puzzled by this John Smith. And until more light was offered, he deemed it best to go slowly.

"Good!" nodded the stranger. "You're gaining in wisdom, Michael, and if you keep on at that gait, you'll be a veritable Solon before

you know it! Now—how much did Chadwick rob you of?"

"Every dollar I'd raked an' scraped together—cuss him!"

"Amen! Well, that's not quite so definite as it might be, but, if you'll follow my advice, I'll guarantee you at least a few hundreds of that stolen sum: enough to carry you safe out of this region, and keep you from starving until you can make another strike."

"How? Show me *how*, boss!"

"What's the matter with you and me holding up the stage, Hungry?" coolly inquired John Smith. "I know that Hugh Chadwick has a package of money—five thousand dollars—coming to him, in care of Joe Hooley, the driver. I laid my wires to gobble that wad on my own hook, but I don't mind making a fair divvy with you, if you'll take oath to pull out o' this, and bury your old grudge against the judge. What say?"

"You hain't his fri'nd?" hesitated Dobson.

"You hain't axin' this jest to save his life?"

"From you, yes. The judge is *my* meat, and I'm willing to pay for a clear sweep at him. If you still hang off—good-by Michael!"

Quietly though those last words were spoken, Hungry Mike could not doubt their complete earnestness. And so, yielding with as good a grace as possible, he gave his consent to the bargain.

"Good enough, and none too early!" cried John Smith, swinging himself out of the saddle, the better to use his knife on the coil of rope with which Hungry Mike was bound. "The hearse is coming, or my ears play me false for the first time! Steady, Michael! Don't chatter, but open your ears as widely as you know how!"

It took but a few seconds to set Dobson at liberty, and once more mounting, John Smith rapidly but clearly explained the part his oddly-won ally was expected to play in the act to come.

This understanding was made perfect by the time they gained the point where the "hold-up" was to be attempted, and lightly hitching the horse under cover, Smith took the lariat from where it hung by the saddle-bow, and placed his ally in position, giving him a revolver at the last moment, whispering rapidly:

"More for show than use, you understand, Michael. If you let your angry passions boil over so far as to explode a shell, I'll lay you out for the coroner, sure as fate. Now—cover your mug, and ready."

Dobson took the pistol, but at the same time caught Smith's hand with his other member, giving it a peculiar grip, which was returned.

"Good! I begun to hev my doubts, but you be one o' the boys, a'ter all."

CHAPTER VI.

A MAN OF BUSINESS.

"WHAT else did you expect, Hungry?"

"Durned ef I know! You've kep' up sech a dizzy squarmin' from the jump-off, that I couldn't pin ye down, noways! But now, ef you say so, I'm game to do the holdin'-up by my lone-some self!"

"Thanks; but I prefer doing the engineering myself. Now—all ready, Michael?"

"All sot, boss!"

The rattle of wheels over a rocky road was now distinctly to be heard, and further talk was out of the question, if their surprise was to be complete.

John Smith settled the dark 'kerchief firmly over his face, leaving only his eyes unmasked, and they shaded by the drooping brim of his soft felt hat. He made sure the lasso was free from kinks, then stood in the shadow as silent as fate, until the leaders of the four-horse team came almost abreast the ambuscade. Then—

"Hands up, Joe Hooley!" he challenged, in tones very unlike his natural voice. "Hold up, or go down!"

"Stiddy, boys! Don't shoot!" spluttered the surprised driver, drawing on the ribbons and flinging his whole weight on the brake, bringing all to an abrupt stand-still, throwing his team into a tangle and his human freight into a fright, to judge from the sharp scream and sundry hoarse ejaculations which came from the interior.

"Steady is the right word, for all of you!" sternly croaked forth John Smith, stepping clear of the bushes and giving his lariat a single swing around his head before casting its noose over the neck of the nigh leader. "Nobody shall be harmed, unless they try to kick over the traces. In that case—prayers won't save 'em!"

Hungry Mike sprang forward, his unarmed hand gripping the bit of the off leader, his revolver covering the flinching driver. John Smith deftly secured his lasso to a stout bush, then stepped into the moonlight, both hands armed and half raised to cover the stage as he said:

"Fair warning, all! Not a hair of your heads shall come to grief, unless those who wear them kick up a racket. In that case—ready, boys! Riddle the hearse at the first crooked movement!"

"Don't shoot!" came a clear voice from the coach, followed by a head coming in view through the lowered window in the door. "There's a lady in here, please bear in mind, dear sir!"

"Glad to hear as much, for it may save a few cartridges," chuckled the knight of the road, stepping a bit nearer that door. "For *her* sake, then, I beg of the rest to act sensible. And you may set the example, stranger, by making the rest of your person visible to my eyes."

"Anything to keep peace in the family!" laughed the other, opening the door and stepping forth, a natty-looking fellow enough, too, now that the moonlight fell fairly upon his person.

"Hellow! seems like I'd ought to know you, sport?"

"Possibly you might have known me better, had this been a stag-party," coolly responded the passenger, his keen eyes running quickly over that tall, stoop-shouldered figure before him. "My name is Fred Galloway, and I hail from all-over-in-general!"

"I've heard tell of Gallus Fred, but he wouldn't come down so meek and mild, like!"

"I'm Frederick Galloway when ladies are present; next time you try to hold me up, I hope I'll be Gallus Fred, with all that implies!"

"I'm in big luck, ain't I?" laughed the knight of the road, grimly. "But, business goes, and I'm its prophet! You know the rules, sport, hands up, and fingers empty!"

"If you insist, so be it," quietly, lifting his hands above his head. "I never risk a racket when ladies are present."

"Keep him covered, boys, mild though he chirps!" called out Smith, with a nod toward the bushes; then turning his eyes upon the coach, to add: "Will you oblige all hands by stepping outside, my good friends? I'm a man of business, and the fewer words the better. Step out!"

"I'm the only man here," came a voice, as a tall figure stooped to clear the top of the casing. "There's only a single lady left inside, and surely you'll not insist—"

"Sorry, but business is business, and I'm its prophet. Shall I assist you, ma'am?"

"No. I'd rather—your hand, uncle!"

John Smith stepped back a pace or two at sound of that voice, but his next action showed that it was merely to bring all hands within range of his eyes and under his guns.

The tall gentleman turned at the step, assisting a veiled young lady to alight: young, since her every movement betrayed that fact.

"Courage, pet!" muttered the tall man, keeping hold of her gloved hand. "No harm shall come to you through—"

"No harm can come to her, save through bull-headness on the part of her fellow pilgrims!" advised John Smith, cutting his sentence in twain. "I'm tough, but I'm white, so far. Now—steady, all hands!"

"Steady goes, unless the jolting begins on your side of the road," spoke up Fred Galloway. "In that case, look out for an upset!"

"Button up, please! I'm running this circus, bear in mind, and I'm old enough at the business to carry it through without any outside hints. I say, you with the *riata*! Keep it level, and if the team makes a break, tangle 'em up in a heap! And you, Joe Hooley?"

"On deck, an' waitin', boss," came meekly from the box-seat.

"See that you keep that way, then, Joseph. I'd hate to call you off the perch, but I know how, if I have to. *Sabe*, Joseph?"

"Butter wouldn't melt in the mouth o' me, boss, unless you give it full leave!"

"That's hearty! If we never had a tougher nut to crack, road-riding would be softer than a bed of rose-leaves! Horse-guard!"

"Ready, boss!" rumbled Hungry Mike, in the deepest of tones.

"Leave the boys to hold all level, and come this way. Search the shell, and mind you don't overlook any kernel; understand?"

"Ef they's a flea in thar, I'll find it, boss!" chuckled Dobson, entering the stage and beginning his hunt for hidden valuables.

"He may possible find his flea, but if you're expecting anything of monetary value, it's time cut to waste," coolly volunteered Galloway.

And so it proved. Hungry Mike did not slight his duty, but five minutes sufficed to convince him that the passengers had not attempted to save any of their valuables by concealing them inside the stage.

"All right, pardner," nodded John Smith, as Hungry Mike made this report. "The cream will be all the richer from this skimming, then. Just relieve Gallus Fred of his guns, to make it more binding, please!"

The little sport made no resistance, smiling slightly as he saw how carefully John Smith held him covered with both pistols while that search was being prosecuted. It was a mute tribute to the reputation he had won throughout the mines, and he had just vanity enough to feel a bit proud of it.

"Hyar's his tools, boss," reported Dobson, then adding: "Shell I go through his duds fer bigger pay, while I'm at it?"

"Never bother; I'll look after that end of the

business. Just step back here and hold 'em level, pardner."

It took but a few minutes for John Smith to satisfy himself he had thoroughly "cleaned out" this passenger, and he chuckled gleefully as he took a peep into the fat wallet which constituted the main part of his booty, thus far.

"Just a loan, dear fellow," smiled the nervy little sport. "Of course I'll call on you to collect, when the note's due."

"That's business, and if you happen to call when the sign's right, I'll go you odds I borrow some moro! Now, Mr. Knight—"

"You know me, then?" ejaculated the amazed gentleman.

"Don't reckon I'd be so familiar with perfect strangers, do ye?" queried the road-agent, chuckling behind his 'kerchief-mask. "Of course I know ye, and know your business in this section as well. If you have any lingering doubts—I sincerely trust you've brought the cash to make the first payment on Hugh Chadwick's mine, the Neverfail?"

"No, sir, I have not; I'm merely here as an agent, to investigate; I'll save you the trouble of searching me, sir," stiffly, as he produced a notebook, before those grimy hands could touch his person.

John Smith hesitated, like one taken aback, but not for long. He accepted the proffer, then said:

"You're a gentleman, Nathan Knight, and stand high in commercial circles. Of course you wouldn't *lie*. So, this is all the money you have about your clothes?"

"Every dollar, sir," came the stiff response.

"I'll take your word to that effect, and add my hearty thanks for the clean-up, without wasting time in looking it over. I'd give you back a percentage, only I know Hugh Chadwick will gladly supply your needs until you can hear from headquarters. Now, this young lady?"

"Is my niece. Surely, sir, you're not low-down enough to rob *her* of her watch and—"

"Wouldn't know what to do with 'em, for my best girl gave me the dirty shake last week! But, I *have* heard of such a thing as tenderfeet turning a lady into a temporary safety vault, until the clouds roll by!"

"I pledge my word that nothing of the kind has been attempted by either of us, sir," indignantly frowned Nathan Knight.

"You can have my oath as make-weight," added Fred Galloway.

"That's all right, then, and the young lady goes free," and John Smith stepped back, his hands once more arming themselves as he spoke to Hungry Mike:

"Unbitch the team, pardner. I reckon our work is about done here."

For the first time since the "hold-up," Joe Hooley ventured to remonstrate, as Hungry Mike jerked the lines from his hands, then rapidly unhitched both span, stripping them to their bridles alone; but John Smith turned a grim muzzle that way, and the miserable driver meekly subsided. Only to suffer another severe shock when the four horses were led clear of the stage, secured in order for rapid travel.

"Now, Joseph, open your secret locker, just back of your seat, and toss down that little package marked for Hugh Chadwick!" called out the chief road-agent, adding sharply: "No foolshness, Joseph! I know the secret of that hiding-place, and I know what that package holds. Out with it, or off goes your roof!"

"They hain't—he'll bloody murder me ef I was to do it!"

"And I'll do even worse if you *don't* do it! These gents will bear witness that you couldn't help yourself, Hooley, and Hugh won't dare kick when you tell him how come it so. Now—shell out, or croak!"

With a groan of angry disgust, the driver obeyed. John Smith deftly caught the package, thrusting it into his bosom as he motioned Hungry Mike to bring forth his horse from the bushes. This done, he leaped into the saddle, bidding Dobson mount one of the other horses, then added:

"Hate to do it, seeing there's a lady in the case, but the Gophers are too mighty quick to strike a trail for me to throw away a chance. The walking's good, but don't over-heat your blood by walking *too* fast, I beg! And you, Gallus Fred, I'll drop your guns in the road, a few rods from this, if you care to recover them. Now, good-by, and may we all enjoy our next meeting even more than I have this one!"

Hungry Mike rode one of the wheelers, driving the lead span in advance, while John Smith brought up the rear. They broke into a gallop when fairly out of sight of the dismantled stage, and first drawing the cartridges, to guard against a possible explosion through concussion, Smith dropped the pistols taken from Galloway in the road, according to promise.

For more than a mile he maintained that rapid pace; then he slackened up sufficiently to talk with more ease.

"Swear that you'll pull out of this country for good and all, Mike, never to come back, and never to lift hand or gun against Hugh Chadwick, and I'll give you this horse, together with the five thousand I took from the driver. Will you do it?"

"You hain't foolin', boss?"
 "Try me, and see!" tossing him the packet.
 "Tear it open, and make sure it's good money. Chadwick cheated you out of nearly as much, and the surplus can go as interest. Now, take my nag, and treat him as white as you know how, for he saved your life. I'll look after the stage horses."

CHAPTER VII.

A MAN OF THE WORLD.

JOE HOOLEY held in until the sound of horses' hoofs began to grow faint along the hard trail; then his pent-up rage and shame fairly broke loose. For the time being he was fairly wild, and though the lady passenger shrunk back a little timorously, it was not until the driver turned a bit too blasphemous for polite society, that Fred Galloway saw fit to interfere.

"I don't reckon Joe was ever held up before," he explained, in an aside to Nathan Knight, but sufficiently loud for the young lady to catch. "If 'twas any ordinary robbery, he might bottle up his mad, but when he comes to think how Hugh Chadwick will kick on finding his roll of money *non est*—well, I can make some allowance, you see!"

"I don't suppose't would, exactly do to ask him to throw in a few extra explosions on our account?" almost bashfully hinted the elder gentleman; and, no wonder, since that was probably his first attempt at anything akin to a jest, since his callow youth.

"Why, Uncle Nathan!" murmured his niece. "Did he strike you so heavily, then?" respectfully queried Galloway.

"Well, I've heard of heavier losses on Wall street, but never a cleaner sweep!"

"I'm sorry. There were only two. I could easily have saved you, sir," murmured the little sport, with a touch of reproach in his voice. "I dropped to his bluff, first off. Gents in his line of business always make their biggest show at the start, and calling to bushes don't turn 'em into armed men. I could have called 'em both down, only for—"

"You may be right, sir," admitted Knight, as Galloway left his sentence incomplete, rather than appear to be complaining. "With only men along, I'd have helped, rather than hindered you, but— Please mention the sum you lost, Mr. Galloway!"

Instead of complying, Galloway turned away to where Joe Hooley was letting out a fresh link, seemingly bent on "turning the atmosphere blue."

"Drop it, Joseph!" his voice ringing out sternly, his hand gripping an arm until the driver fairly flinched with pain. "There's a lady present, and you've broken the limit long ago."

"But you see'd him? You hear him? An' you didn't never— The boys'll brand me as a way-up liar ef I tell 'em Gallus Fred never give even a try at a kick when his guns— Oh, sufferin' Moses!" with a muffled bawl and clumsy shuffle. "An' then thar's old Chad!"

"The more blame he for turning an unarmed hearse into a treasure-coach! But—reckon cussing will let you down any easier, Joseph?"

"Ef it could! But what else kin I do, boss?"

"Button up, and stand guard while I take a short stroll up the road, to see if our gentle friend was really fool enough to discard such tools as I carried. You will?"

Without pausing for an actual assent, Galloway hastened away in the direction indicated, to meet with a joyous surprise before he had gone a furlong. For there, distinctly visible against the dusty trail, were the weapons he had valued far higher than the money he had lost in their company.

It took but a short minute to make sure the tools had received no material injury, and to refill their cylinders with fresh cartridges; then, feeling once more a man, the little sport retraced his steps, to be met with a repetition of the question he had once evaded:

"Oblige me by naming your loss, Mr. Galloway. Of course I hold myself responsible, since I begged you to yield without a fight."

"Please don't mention it, my dear sir. I dare say you saved a fool, if he did lose his small change, and—well, later, since you make a point of it," bowing before that impatient gesture. "Just now we've Miss—Miss—"

"My niece, Mr. Galloway," stiffly bowed the other.

"Your humble servant, Miss Knight," bowed Galloway. "I can truthfully say that I am delighted to form your acquaintance, and only regret the occasion because I greatly fear you will remember this introduction as but part of a disagreeable adventure."

"Disagreeable enough, if that's all," frowned Nathan Knight, his tall figure coming between the couple, as though by accident. "What are we to do, next? Without means of travel—"

"Is it too far to walk, Mr. Galloway?" ventured the young lady.

"To Gopher Slope? Only a couple of miles or so, and mainly a down slope, but if you'd rather— Joe Hooley!"

"I'm here—wish't I wasn't!"

"As driver for the company, you're in duty

bound to carry us to our destination, so what's the matter with you're hoofing it to the Slope and bringing back another team?"

Miss Knight—if such was her name—whispered a few words to her relative, and Knight spoke up, briskly:

"We'd rather walk the rest of the way than wait here. Those rascals might take it into their heads to come back, and—"

"Never a fear of it, sir," reassured Galloway. "They know that half the Slope will be on the scent as soon as word goes out, and they are spoiling good horseflesh to save poor man-meat. I really wish I could think different, for I'd give—never mind, breaking off with a brief sigh of regret, which he could not entirely smother.

"You kin show 'em the way, boss?" muttered Hooley, tightening his belt as though for a race. "I'd rather bite off a thumb then do it, but sence it's got to be, I'm g'wine to make the trip the quickest I know how! Jest think of it! Jest think—durned ef I do, though!" with a muffled howl in place of the curses he longed to pour forth, then dashing in a run down the road leading to Gopher Slope.

"Poor Joe!" softly laughed the little sport, after a brief glance at the receding figure. "It takes all sorts of men to make a world, come to think! Now there he is, dreading a meeting with the very gentleman I count myself in big luck to call friend enough to make himself my banker until I can play even!"

"You mean Hugh Chadwick?" quickly asked Knight, giving Galloway a little start of surprise, until he recalled the words let fall by the head road-agent.

"Precisely. You are acquainted with the gentleman, of course?"

"Not personally. I hardly think we ever met in the flesh. Come, Norine: take my arm, dear, and we'll be moving."

For some little time no more words were spoken, as the trio walked along the trail leading to town. Galloway felt as though he had risked if not received a rebuff, and he was too proud to press his attentions where they were not entirely welcome.

As a general thing, he was rather proud than otherwise of his present station in life, for only the select few can ever hope to stand at or near the head of the sporting class. Just now, thanks to those blue eyes, far too bright for even a veil to dim their luster, he was a bit more sensitive than usual. For probably the first time in his life, he wished he had a more reputable profession to claim.

"You are acquainted in Gopher Slope, then, Mr. Galloway?" at length asked Nathan Knight.

"I know it like a book, sir, though I've grown a full year older than I was when last in town. Still, the Slope is past the transition stage, and I dare say it has changed but little since then."

"Hugh Chadwick is one of your friends, I judge? Would it be impertinent to ask his real character, as a business man?"

"Keen as a flint, and mighty nigh as hard, viewed from that quarter," laughed Galloway, more than willing to talk: was this gentleman not a close relative to that charming young lady, a single glimpse of whose fair face had caused him to abandon a route already laid out, to take the same line she was following?

"As a man, Chadwick is all right, I imagine, but if you expect to deal with him in a business way, you want to keep both eyes open."

"Thanks: I'll bear your hint in mind. And your frankness emboldens me to venture still further: is the Neverfail first-class property?"

"I only wish I owned its equal," emphatically. "And yet, little more than a year ago, Chadwick and his partner were hustling for grub—for food, I should have said," with an apologetic bow to Norine.

"He had a partner, then? Can you recall his name? Not that it matters, much, only I was under the impression that Chadwick was the original discoverer of the Neverfail."

"I'm not so sure which one made the first strike, but a fellow named Lawrence—Ethelbert Lawrence, I believe his full title ran—was Chadwick's partner. I knew him, casually, and—beg pardon, but—"

The usually cool sport stammered and seemed at a loss for words, just then, facing partly around, his keen gaze passing from age to youth then back again. Nathan Knight stared, while Norine shrunk visibly. And as he noted this, Fred Galloway blurted out:

"I used to know Lawrence, sir, and I couldn't help thinking—I caught a glimpse of the lady's face, back at the hotel, by pure accident, of course, and—it reminded me powerfully of his!"

"You mean—just what, Mr. Galloway?"

"That the thought just happened to strike me, speaking of Lawrence, you know, that—there is no relationship?"

"This lady is my niece," stiffly bowed Knight. "I am here on business, she merely for the pleasure to be extracted from a trip through a—to her—unknown section of our country."

"I could wish you a more favorable introduction to our mountain society, Miss Knight," bowed Galloway, with a smile, as he extended his hand, respectfully pressing the dainty mem-

ber timidly submitted. "May I hope you will not judge us all by the specimens just gone?"

"Were I to try, the remembrance of your gallantry would quickly rebuke me, Mr. Galloway," said Norine, gravely but sweetly. "You submitted to robbery rather than endanger a stranger."

"Some would be shrewd enough to suspect that I might secretly be glad of such a convenient cloak to cover cowardice," laughed the little sport, as he reluctantly let her hand withdraw itself from his ardent if wholly respectful clasp.

"If that had a foundation on truth, you would be very careful not to bring it up, even in jest," quickly retorted Norine.

"I thank you, Miss Knight. I would gladly pay a thousand-fold as much for another such sentence from your—from the lips of a true lady," bowed Galloway.

"Can't we talk while walking?" interposed Nathan Knight, who had apparently formed a far less favorable opinion of the dapper stranger than the words of his niece might imply. "And—about this man who reminded you—who resembled my niece: when did you see him last?"

"Just before I left the Slope. He called me in to witness the sale of the Neverfail: to sign papers, and that, you comprehend?"

"The sale was to Hugh Chadwick, of course?"

"Of course. And, unless rumor lies, Hugh made a mighty profitable bargain of it, too! Still, that's nothing out of the way: he's noted for just that class of good luck!"

"And Lawrence: have you any idea where he may be at present? Not that it matters so much," with an apologetic laugh, "but the resemblance you alluded to keeps his name before my eyes. Did he leave town after disposing of his share in the mine?"

"He may have done so, but I can't say for certain. I left almost immediately after witnessing the transfer, you know. For all I can say to the contrary, he may still be living in Gopher Slope."

Nathan Knight asked no further question on that point, just then, and some little distance was covered in silence. The moonlight shone fairly upon the stage trail, and the traveling was not very difficult, even to a delicately-reared young lady. Norine kept her veil down, but Fred Galloway did not yet abandon all hope of winning at least a passing glance at the fair face it concealed. If brisk talking could bring such an event to pass, he knew his reward must come, in time.

"I'll make it a point to look Lawrence up, if he's in town, sir, and then you can judge as to the resemblance for yourself. Of course I may be in error, for I was blessed with but a momentary glimpse, and—"

"Hark!" sharply ejaculated Nathan Knight, halting and flinging up a hand to check that voluble speech. "What is that sound?"

"The clatter of hoofs, coming from the Slope, sure as fate!" decided Galloway, after a brief space of acute listening. "Hooley must have put in his best licks, surely!"

"Then you really think that's the solution?"

"Sure! And I'm betting long odds Hugh Chadwick leads the party!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A SELF-CONVICTED CRIMINAL.

"TAIN'T a ghost, jedge, ef ye do look like it!" spoke the owner of that shaggy head, stepping more fully into view, a grin broadening on his face as his little eyes took note of that recoiling figure.

Of all men this was the very last person Hugh Chadwick would have thought of naming, had he been given time for shaping a guess as to the identity of his caller. But, despite the shock that face had given him, and its following so closely after his narrow escape from death at the hands of Hungry Mike Dobson, he showed true metal by the rapidity with which he rallied, starting forward with extended hand, exclaiming:

"It really is you, then, Clough?"

"Don't that feel sorter like it, jedge?" grinning still more broadly as their hands crossed.

"Where under the sun have you been—but wait!" turning to dismiss the housekeeper, who seemed anything but delighted with her employer's visitor. "You needn't bother about sitting up, Polly. I'll see to letting Mr. Clough out, and to closing the house. We may be late, talking over old times: Eh, Bart?"

"Waal, I reckon they is a heap matter fer chinnin', jedge," nodded that worthy, audaciously winking at the buxom housekeeper. An' ef Missis Polly'll jest sling a few fingers o' good whisky this way, why I'll try fer to worry 'long the best I kin, 'bout the light o' her purty eyes."

"Wait on him yourself, if he needs it, Mr. Chadwick: I'm going to bed!" declared Mrs. Maydew, flouncing off in high dudgeon.

"High-flyer, hain't she, jedge?" chuckled Clough.

"Too high for you to even look at, so quit your trying, Bart Clough," snapped Chadwick, motioning his visitor back to the room where he had been waiting, following after, and closing the door which opened into the hall. "Now, my fine fellow, explain yourself!"

"All in a lump, jedge? Cain't do it, noways!"

My mouth is purty wide, but I'll hev to let it run out in a string, so to speak. Kin I squat?"

"I thought you were in—well, call it glory!"

"Money in your pocket, ef I was, eh?" retorted the ruffian, with a show of his yellow teeth, more vicious than mirthful. "Waal, ef I hain't in glory, I've bin too mighty nigh t'other place to find any fun in lookin' back—I jest hev, fer a scan'alous fact, jedge!"

Hugh Chadwick made no immediate response. A sharp pain shot through his head, and a hand flew up to his hurt. He removed his hat, and Bart Clough gave a low exclamation as he caught sight of blood.

"You're hurt, jedge!"

"I knew as much before you told me, Bart," with a sickly smile on his pale face as he sunk into a chair, near the table which bore a lighted lamp. "I'll be all right in a moment or two. Meantime, help yourself," with a slight nod across the room to a small closet set in the wall. "Bring a glass for me, while you're about it."

Bart Clough lost no time in improving that hint, and when he resumed his seat, glancing over the array of glasses, decanter, and box of cigars, he heaved a little sigh of envious content.

"Good glory, jedge! ef I hed sech luck as you, I'd take a rap like that'n every day in the week! An' yit— Who helped ye to the best an' biggest part o' it all? Who but jest mis'able me?"

"Don't let your imagination run away with you, Bart. You helped me to this? How, pray?"

"Didn't I—shell I say it in jest so many words, jedge?"

There was a thinly-veiled menace in those tones, but Chadwick, now himself again, smiled faintly, in undisguised contempt.

"I know what you mean to insinuate, Clough, but that won't wash. You made a botch of your work, as usual, and if I let you snarl a bit, it's only because I don't count you worth getting angry at. Sabe?"

The burly ruffian drooped his eyes, taking time to fill and slowly empty a glass of whisky, before venturing a reply. Then he said:

"I was a fool, mebbe, jedge, but ef so, 'twas in not holdin' out fer you givin' me 'structions in plain black an' white. As fer makin' a botch o' the job, mebbe ye'll be kind 'nough to tell me how ye make that out?"

"Do you dare look me in the eyes and say that you did what I paid you for attempting?" sternly demanded Chadwick.

"Yes. I done all you paid me in part fer tryin'. I couldn't git here afore, but I'm comin' now fer the rest o' my pay," slowly, distinctly uttered the desperado, his little eyes meeting that keen gaze without flinching an atom.

That battle of eyes lasted for several seconds, but Chadwick was the first to give way, covering his defeat—if such it really was—with a short, dry laugh.

"I see you have got your part down to a fine point, Clough, and it would be a pity to make you waste all that study. So—what more have you to offer?"

"I didn't come hyar lookin' fer no row, jedge," said his visitor, in softer tones, as he refilled his glass. "All I ax is what is jestly my own. An' ef I hain't ained it all, fifty times over, then I'd like to know!"

"So would I! Go on, Bart. There's no ears but mine to catch your words, so you needn't fear to speak right out. You say you did your job and earned your money. What job was that, pray?"

"The job you set me to do. I killed your man, now I want the rest o' the pay you promised fer doin' that job—I do, jedge!"

An expression of blank amazement came over the face of his host, and Hugh Chadwick stared wonderingly into those sullen eyes for a full minute before breaking the silence. Then—

"What do you mean, Bart Clough?"

"Business, jedge, right up to the hilt!" came the stern response, as Clough leaned partly across the table, as though to concentrate his gaze the more surely. "I won't name no names, fer that's a woman under the same ruff, an' they've all got ears as kin stretch a rod to git at anythin' like a secret. But this I will say: you offered me a pile o' ducats, part down an' part later, ef I'd make sure a sart'in critter didn't come to breakfast when the bell rung."

"Are you perfectly certain you're not after the wrong man, Bart?"

"Do you take me for a plum' fool, jedge?"

"Would you rather I called you a knave?" purred Chadwick, actually seeming to enjoy the audacity of his uncouth caller. "I hired you to put out a certain person's light, then? And you did it, of course?"

"I tuck your money, an' I done your job, jedge. I can't make out jest why you should try to bluff me back, but you can't git over cold fac's. Hain't you made dollars whar I'm axin' cents? An' didn't I do all the dirty work, leavin' you jest the layin' back fer fortune to pour ducats all over ye? Didn't I—s-a-a-y?"

"You say, Bart! It's almost as amusing as watching a play, and I'm pretty sure it will not cost nearly so much."

"It'll cost you jest three hundred dollars, jedge! I tuck two at start, an' trusted to your word fer the rest of my pay. Now—ef you try to squarm out o' the bargin, durned ef I don't blow the gaff all over the Slope!"

"You'll declare that you committed murder, then appeal to me to admit that my good money hired you? Bart, have you spent all of this year past in a lunatic asylum?"

The ruffian stared, then his fierce rage seemed to grow cooler as he took in the full purport of those sneering words. He must have seen how foolish were his threats, for he drew back in his seat, speaking in milder, more reasonable tones:

"Course I wouldn't go jest that fur, jedge, 'thout you driv' me to it. I'd hev to pull hemp 'longside o' you, an'—waal, I hain't quite ready to b'lieve you'd cheat a poor devil out o' money he ained fifty times over—no less!"

"I'm willing to hear you tell your story, Bart, if only for old times' sake. I haven't forgotten when you and I worked on the same level, nor how— But go on! You say I hired you to do a certain job. Why didn't you do as you agreed, then?"

"Who dast to even hint I didn't?" with a flush of anger, which as quickly died away before those coldly gazing eyes. "I tuck your money. I swore to do the job you wanted done. I watched my chauce fer to make a sure thing out of it, an'—I did it, jedge!"

"So you said before, I believe," with a careless nod. "Have you got it all down so fine that you can tell just when, where, and how you earned those hundreds, Bart?"

"You're tryin' to work me up to a row, jedge, countin' on takin' a snap-shot under the table, mebbe?" hesitated the burly knave.

For answer, Hugh Chadwick lifted his arms and clasped his empty hands on top of the table, his smile widening, though his keen gaze never for an instant left the little eyes of his uncouth visitor.

"Go on, Bart. You can't begin to imagine how intensely I am interested in your little confession. You watched you chance, you say? What sort of a chance was it, pray?"

"You can't hev fergot how it come, anyway," sulkily growled the self-admitted assassin. "I see the two eyes o' ye ketch fire when—when he told ye he was gwine to ride over to 'Merica City, the next day. An' I see the wink ye giv' me when you saw me listenin'. An' so—I pulled out o' town that same night, an' lay by the trail whar I knowed my game would hev to pass. Fer, ef he'd 'lowed to go the reg'lar route, wouldn't he 'a' tuck the stage? But, on hoss-back, he could save full half a day, by turnin' off into Dead Man's Guleh, an' so on through the range; but you know all that, 'thout my tellin' of ye!"

"Don't skip a word on my account, Bart," smiled the judge, with his blandest air. "We've got the night before us, and you do narrate most amusingly!"

"I'm givin' ye the straight goods, jedge, let ye joke at 'em as ye may," doggedly resuming: "I waited ontel he come 'long, an' even you couldn't 'a' axed fer a surer chauce! An' so—waal, I was cached so close to whar he passed, that the fire from my gun sot his coat to blazin', jedge! An' he jest keeled over like a hunk o' meat! An' I lepped out, an' mounted him, butcher in the fist o' me, an'—waal, I couldn't a'ford to run no resks, ye want to know, jedge!"

"You killed your man, then, Bart?"—drawled Chadwick, still with that enigmatical smile upon his pale face.

"Jest as you paid me fer doin', jedge," with a slow but vicious nod. "I killed him. I killed him plenty 'nough fer a 'round dozen, but I never was one to slight a job, an' I hed a boss who promised big pay fer sure work."

"Meaning me, of course? Well, having done your work—as you say—why didn't you come back to claim the balance of your reward?"

"Beca' I jest couldn't, jedge!" with a short, ugly laugh. "I could 'a' tuck my davy thar wasn't 'nother soul 'ithin two mile o' me, but I riz up, to find a ole-time pard hed me kivered with both hands. An' he not only made me divvy, jedge, but he kept the double drop ontel I'd tuck a solemn oath I'd help him kerry out a bit o' work he hed on hand, jest then, which was a mite too hefty fer his lonesome self. And so—he hed the wu'st way o' coaxin' a critter ye ever did see, jedge! I jest couldn't 'fuse him his wishes, an' so—I knuckled down to everythin' he axed."

"We kivered up my meat, whar it wouldn't make no show. I tuck the hoss a mile furdur, then slit its throat an' drapped it down a deep crack in the rocks. Then I went 'long 'ith my ole pard, to help do his job, but it tuck a mighty sight longer'n we eyther of us counted on."

"Missionary work, of course?" sneered Chadwick, with a yawn.

"Never you mind, jedge. I hed to j'ine in, or pard swore he'd blow the gaff onto me. I've jest got back to the Slope, an' I'm holdin' out both hands o' me fer them three hundred ducats—see?"

"I'm very sorry you didn't come earlier, Bart, but—"

"Don't I say I couldn't come? I got a hurt

that laid me by the heels, an' many's the time I 'lowed you'd never hev to fork over the balance o' them hundreds, jedge! But now—money talks!"

"So I've heard others say, old fellow, but—what has all this to do with me? I owe you no money, man!"

"You swore you'd pay me when my work was done, Hugh Chadwick! I've done that job, an' now I want what I've ained!" fiercely spoke Clough.

"Sorry, but I don't deal in hemp, my dear fellow, and that is about what you've earned, according to your own confession."

"Jedge, didn't you hire me to do up Ethelbert Lawrence?"

CHAPTER IX.

A FACER FOR BART CLOUGH.

THERE was a touch of reproach in the tones, but Bart Clough lent his query emphasis by sharply rapping the table with his knuckles, and there was a wicked glow in the little eyes which took note of each change in that pale face opposite.

Those changes were not many, and most assuredly fear was not among them. Unless features lie, amused contempt predominated.

"You spoke of being detained by a hurt, old fellow: somewhere in the neighborhood of your brain, wasn't it?"

"Never you mind. I kin show the marks when I hev to. Jest now—is it to be a sure 'nough fight atween us, jedge?"

"Not unless you will have it that way, Clough," was the easy response. "As I said, you and I used to work on the same level, and old times ought to count for something. Still—I knew you were always something of a knave, but I never picked you out as a fool!"

"Which comes to— Spit it out, jedge!"

"That, where I might have given you an odd hundred or so, out of my plenty, had you asked it in the name of those old days, I'll see you further before I'll submit to be gouged by a lie!"

"What lie? What do you mean, Hugh Chadwick?"

"What do you mean, Bart Clough?"

"Fu'st that you hired me to kill Ethelbert Lawrence."

"When?"

"Less'n a week a'ter he bought you out o' the Neverfail. Mebbe you'll say that part of it is a lie, too?"

"I do say it is a lie. I never hired you to kill Ethelbert Lawrence. I never sold my share of the Neverfail to him. I flatly deny each and every insinuation you have flung out this night, Bart Clough, and bluntly repeat what I hinted before: if you're not crazy, then you are the wildest idiot I ever saw or heard!"

A sickly grin came into the self-convicted criminal's face as he sat listening to those slow, coldly measured sentences. He sat in silence for nearly a minute after the final word died away, staring into those hard brown eyes, plainly striving to read what lay back of them. But then he spoke, in low, hoarse tones:

"I've told ye gospel truth, jedge, but ef I'd 'a' even dreamed o' you tryin' to play me sech dirt as this, I'd 'a' come at ye mighty dif'rent. Do you raally reckon I'll let ye cheat me out o' my pay?"

"I cheat no man, Bart, and that gives me the right to declare that no man shall ever cheat me, through help of mine. If I had been insane enough to place my credit, if not life, so wholly in your power as your silly claim tries to make out, wouldn't I just be ass enough to clinch it all by paying the amount you ask? But, comfortably as I am fixed, Bart, from a monetary point of view, I can't afford to let even an old side-partner blackmail me."

"I hain't got the gift o' gab like you hev, jedge, but ef I hain't got all tangled up in the wits o' me, the hull thing b'iles down to this: you mean to cheat me out o' my pay?"

"No I don't, Clough," with a short, soft chuckle that brought a hotter flush into that rugged face across the little table. "Simply because your services are 'all a dream—or worse! And I'll prove what I say, so fairly and squarely that even you will have to own up I'm entitled to laugh your foolish threats to scorn."

"I wouldn't 'a' made none, jedge, ef you'd treated me anyways nigh white! But when you stan' thar a-grinnin'—"

"You've had your innings, Bart Clough," coldly interrupted Hugh Chadwick, his voice hardening as he proceeded. "I've listened to your preposterous claims with a patience which old-time acquaintance alone could justify. Now—listen to me, in turn!"

"You hinted that I hired you to do murder on a certain personage, paying you a portion down, and pledging my honor for the balance. You admit murdering a man; possibly you did that much, though such a dangerous admission is scant credit to your shrewdness. People in this part of the country are mighty apt to hang a murderer, Bart Clough!"

"Thar'll be two o' us kickin' wind at the same time, jedge!"

"Not unless you bring a more plausible charge against me than that of conspiring with you for

the death of Ethelbert Lawrence, old pard," quietly chuckled the mine-owner. "But we've been sparring quite long enough. To business, old fellow!"

"Hain't I bin tryin' to do business ever sence you come in, jedge?"

"Not from my point of view, you haven't! First, I deny even wishing harm might come to my old partner, much less hiring you to do him up. Secondly, I flatly deny ever selling my share in the Neverfail Mine to Ethelbert Lawrence, or any other man!"

"Augh, come off!" snorted the desperado in utter disgust. "Didn't I help sign the papers? Didn't you call me to witness the deal, your own self?"

"If you witnessed anything of the sort, you did it in your dreams, Bart Clough. I believe you had ample time; you kept hog-drunk three days out of every four! But you interrupt. Wait until I finish, please."

"As a third point, allow me to distinctly inform you that, instead of selling my share to Lawrence, I bought him out, and paid cash down on the nail for all his rights, title and interest in the Neverfail. And fourthly, Ethelbert Lawrence was alive and well, in Gopher Slope, fully two weeks later than the date you set for his killing!"

"You don't—it's a lie!" gasped Clough, starting back until his chair gave a little jump along the floor. "Didn't I down him, jest as you figgered it out? Didn't I kiver his karkidge—"

"Not that of Lawrence, I can make oath, Bart," laughed Chadwick, seeming to really enjoy the stupid consternation expressed in those dazed eyes and upon that weather-roughened countenance.

"Who—*who* was the critter, then?"

Before an answer could be given, even had the judge been prepared to solve that enigma, a thundering rap echoed through the hall, and then it seemed as though some excited personage was doing his level best to splinter the panels of the front door.

"The devil! What can—"

"Ef you've sold me out, jedge—" snarled Bart Clough, on his feet at the same instant with his host, pistol in hand.

"I say, jedge!" came a voice from without, as that hammering ceased for a few seconds. "Roust ye out! Thar's bin little ole Satan to pay, an' I'm—turn out, ef ye hope to git yer money back!"

"Joe Hooley, by the fiends!" exploded Chadwick, with a fierce gesture, but quickly adding, to his guest: "Wait a bit, Bart. Something's gone crooked with the stage, I reckon, but it don't concern you."

That hammering was renewed, and Chadwick hastened to the door, opening it with an angry growl:

"Let up, you you crazy fool! Want to break—*you*, Hooley?"

"Wuss luck that I cain't tell ye *no*!" exploded the driver, then taking the dreaded plunge at once: "Held up, boss, an' the packet I was to fetch ye—he's got it!"

"Who's got it?"

"The devil, I do reckon, boss, fer he knowed too mighty much not to be a peg or two 'bove any common truck! Why, jedge, he knowed jest whar that secrut locker lay, an' jest what she kerried, an'—"

"Stop," coldly said Chadwick, gripping an arm and drawing the excited driver inside the building, where the hall-lamp cast a clear light upon his sweaty face. "Now talk reason. You were held up, you say? When, where, and how? Talk quick, but talk straight, or you and I are mighty apt to get into a racket."

That cold, stern voice, backed by those steady eyes, calmed Joe Hooley sufficiently for him to tell a fairly straight story of the hold-up, though he exaggerated a bit when it came to the loss of the valuable package of money.

"I lied to him, jedge, ontel I was clean black in the face o' me!" he asseverated, doing his level best to meet that glowing gaze without flinching. "I swore they wasn't no money aboard. I swore they wasn't no secrut pocket back o' my seat. But the best I could do wouldn't work! He jest froze fast to the bun'le, an' come pesky nigh takin' my ruff off afore he got it, too!"

"You gave him my property, then?"

"He tuck it, boss! An' how could I save it? The hull gang hed me kivered, an'—thar was Gallus Fred, an' the pilgrim from funder East, an' the petticoat—I called 'em to b'ar witness that I'd done my purtiest to save it, boss! An' I'll fetch 'em all afore ye, ef—"

"Button! Have you told the news in town? But of course you have," flashing a glance over the little crowd which had by this time pressed close to the open doorway. "Go bring my horse—lively, Joe! I'll hunt those devils off the face of the earth rather than submit to such an outrage."

He gave the driver a thrust that materially aided him to clear the entry, then turned back to where Bart Clough was eagerly listening at the partly opened door.

"You heard? All right, then! I'm going to see what can be done toward getting back my own, but—*you* lie low, Bart! I'll see you later, for I'd hate to bear down too mighty hard on an

old pard. Keep a still tongue betwixt your teeth, and possibly we can straighten out this bit of a tangle, after all."

"That sounds more white, jedge!" nodded Clough, with a relieved air. "I kin wait, now you begin fer to 'pear like my ole pard. When you want to see me, jest make the ole sign—on the stable door'll do—an' Bart Clough'll be on deck, cocked, primed, an' ready fer business!"

There was no time for further talk. Joe Hooley was bringing a saddled horse to the front door, and Chadwick had to get his belt of arms. So, slipping outside without attracting notice, Bart Clough lost himself among the shadows.

The startling tidings had already spread throughout the town, and as this was the first actual "hold-up" which had taken place for more than a year, excitement ran high, and there were no lack of volunteers to join in the man-hunt, when Hugh Chadwick dashed up to the front of the "Pluribus Hotel," that being the usual place for unloading the tri-weekly stage.

Here it was that he, for the first time, learned how thoroughly the road-agents had done their work; for Joe Hooley had flinched when it came to mentioning the theft of all four horses to the principal owner of the stage line.

For once the usually cool mine-owner lost his head, breaking into a storm of curses, hot and fierce, against those audacious knaves who had dealt such a heavy blow to all Gopher Slope, as well as himself.

"It's a slur on our manhood, fellow-citizens!" he cried, finally. "We'll be the laughing-stock for miles around, unless we play even! Who will follow my lead?"

That was a useless question, for every man who could muster a mount with four serviceable legs, was already up and waiting, yelling for the start. And with a final wave of his hat, Hugh Chadwick sped away, Joe Hooley riding one of a span of horses, to bring in the stage.

Little time was cut to waste by the way, though the steadily rising grade soon cooled the ardor of the animals, if not that of their riders. And, once in motion, the judge grew calmer, until he could bring himself down to more carefully questioning Joe Hooley as to the robbery.

Among other things, Hooley recalled the fact that the chief robber had called the elderly passenger by name, mention of which seemed to give the judge quite a serious shock, judging from his manner.

"You are sure the name was *Knight*, Joe?" he asked, hoarsely.

"Dead sure, boss! Nathan Knight, the critter said. An' he reckoned as how *you'd* be plenty glad to 'vance money fer his keep ontel he had time fer to git word back to whar he come from."

Hugh Chadwick asked no further questions, but as he maintained the lead of that company, his eyes were keenly keeping watch, suspecting the passengers in each succeeding shadow on the trail, until closer inspection proved his error.

Strangely enough, considering the circumstances, nothing was seen of the three wayfarers up to the moment when Hugh Chadwick caught sight of the stage, his first glimpse of which caused him to wrench up his horse, with a sharp cry of amazement.

And little wonder at that, for there stood not only the stage, but hitched to it, each in his proper place, were both span of horses carried off by the road-agents, two hours before!

What could it all mean?

CHAPTER X.

A NERVY LITTLE SPORT.

NATHAN KNIGHT gave a little start as Fred Galloway spoke so positively, and had not his face just then been cast into shadow by the brim of his hat, a slight increase of pallor might have been noted.

"You really think Mr. Chadwick would take saddle on such a hunt?"

"Why not?" with a faint echo of surprise in his voice as he flashed a glance toward the speaker, attracted by the tremor in that voice.

"He's not actually a judge, you understand, and even if it was something more than an empty title, don't forget that you're now in the wild and woolly West, where a man may not only sentence sinners, but lend a hand in raking 'em in, as well!"

"But I had an idea—"

"That the judge was too wealthy to bother over such a loss?" the little sport laughingly supplied. "If so, you've got considerable to unlearn, so far as Chadwick is concerned. He's a jolly good fellow, when the moon sits in the right quarter, but he *does* hate to lose money—never a man more so! And, if that wasn't a dummy package, I'm open to lay any odds you like that the judge is leading the gang yonder!"

Rapid as had been this interchange of words, it lasted long enough to bring the noise considerably closer, until there was no room left for doubting of what it was born. Not only could the confused clatter of shod hoofs on the hard trail be distinguished, but now and again a cheer or a shout came to those listening ears.

Then, still showing something of embarrassment, Nathan Knight hurriedly spoke again:

"Must we meet them, here on the trail? Can't we avoid it, some way? For reasons which I think quite sufficient, I'd rather not meet Hugh Chadwick just at present."

"Why not?" briskly asked Galloway, hiding whatever surprise such an odd question might well have caused him. "Twill be a rather rough and noisy crowd for a lady to— Your hand, Miss Knight. You can manage to follow, I reckon, sir?"

"There is no danger of getting lost?" asked Norine, as she yielded a hand to Galloway's clasp and suffered herself to be led at an abrupt angle out of the stage trail.

"Not the slightest danger, I assure you, Miss Knight. I know every rod of the country for fifty miles around, and I could guide you to Gopher Slope with my eyes blinded."

"Hurry—don't chatter!" sharply whispered Nathan Knight, pressing hard upon their heels, casting an uneasy glance over a shoulder as he added: "They're coming very close. By this bright light—"

"They can't well see through solid rock, though," laughed the sport, as another sharp angle carried them behind a massive boulder, some three-score yards from the road. "Now, to see how nearly I might have carried off the odds I felt like offering."

A scrubby cedar grew close to the rock, and a wave of his hand lent point to his words. Nathan Knight flushed a bit at the idea of playing spy, but as the noisy company came almost abreast their covert, he swallowed his scruples and eagerly peered through the stunted cedar.

"I called the turn, you see?" chuckled the little sport, as a single keen glance assured him that Hugh Chadwick was indeed leading that force. "Yonder rides the judge, at the head, and, there's Joe Hooley, with a span to haul the hearse—I should say *coach*—to the Slope."

The distance was too great for any very accurate examination, especially as the company was going at a brisk trot, but Nathan Knight made the most of his chance, watching Hugh Chadwick with a depth of interest which could hardly have escaped the notice of Galloway, had not that person just then been otherwise occupied.

For Norine, too, was breathlessly gazing through those scraggy branches, apparently seeing no one save Hugh Chadwick, of all that party. And as Fred gently touched her bent shoulder, he felt her figure shivering violently.

"It's not the cold, surely!" he inwardly told himself as he withdrew his hand, unnoticed by the young lady. "It's the judge! But—what can he be to her?"

From that instant Fred Galloway was determined to solve the enigma which he felt surely existed, but not for a single moment would he admit the possibility of there being aught wrong about Norine. Head, as well as heart, told him so much; but he was not so certain regarding her uncle.

Even before that curious proposal to go into hiding had been made, his curiosity had been awakened by the odd manner in which Nathan Knight had put his queries concerning Chadwick and Lawrence, the former joint-owners of the Neverfail Mine.

"Well, Mr. Knight," he spoke, blandly, as the company vanished up the trail. "Joe'll soon be on his way back with the coach, and if you wish to ride the rest of the way to town, I'll halt him for you."

"Is it so very far?" hesitated the old gentleman, drawing a long breath, then casting a dubious glance over that rocky tract.

"A short mile further, and the walking will be better than it looks from here. Still, if Miss Knight—"

"If there is no danger of meeting other—other men like those who robbed us, I believe I'd prefer walking," hesitated Norine.

"I'll cheerfully guarantee you against any such encounter," laughed the little sport. "I could almost wish we *might* meet them, though, if only on the chance of regaining part of my lost credit!"

"You have gained, not lost, in my estimation, Mr. Galloway," came the earnest assurance. "You showed truer courage by yielding to my fears, than if you had slain both those wicked men!"

"You are very kind to say so, but— All right, sir!" with a curt bow, as he noted how Nathan Knight was frowning. "After a bit of rough walking, you'll find it smooth enough traveling. This way, please."

Fred Galloway proved as good as his word, and five minutes later the trio were able to converse as they proceeded, almost as readily as would have been the case had they stuck to the regular trail.

"You saw the judge, Mr. Knight; what opinion did you form?"

"You must have thought it strange in me, sir," hesitated Knight, letting that question pass without actual answer. "Still, when I tell you, in confidence, that I came here as the agent of a company of capitalists to whom Mr. Chadwick has offered a mine called Neverfail, at a large

figure, you may be able to comprehend just why I preferred being a little more at ease before forming his acquaintance."

"That's natural, if not absolutely necessary, with a man of the judge's caliber. He's keen as a razor when trade's in prospect, and a man needs all his wits about him if he hopes to come out first-best. Still, even if you miss Chadwick now, he'll be mighty apt to wake you early in the morning, with a call."

"But, he can't know—"

"Joe Hooley will be mighty apt to tell him, then," nodded Galloway. "You forget what that fellow said, when he called you by name? Hooley took it all in, of course, and he'll drop a hint into the judge's ear, if only in hopes to get off with a lighter scorching on account of that money package. Of course, it's none of my business, but I reckon I'm only playing fair to drop you a hint, sir."

"Thanks. I'd forgotten, for the moment. How on earth that villain could have known—"

"It's an important part of the trade, you see," laughed the little sport. "No doubt he found out your secret, much as he learned about that hidden locker and its contents."

There was a brief silence, during which Nathan Knight might have been digesting that hint, and its possible bearing on his mission to Gopher Slope. But when he spoke again, it was to mention another name:

"About this Lawrence fellow: there's no doubt about his sell-out being on the square, of course?"

"I can't for the life of me see how there *could* be anything wrong about it. Of course I didn't read the papers, for all I was needed for was to sign as witness to the transfer. That part was strictly according to Gunter."

"Of course, or you wouldn't have taken part in it. And this man Lawrence: what sort of reputation did he bear among the citizens?"

"Prime. He was hardly as popular among the sports as Chadwick, but he was regarded as squarer, more reliable. If Chad saw an object in lying, he *could* pull the long-bow a bit. If Lawrence said a thing once, you could safely take oath it was *just so*."

Carelessly as he spoke, to all seeming, Fred Galloway was closely noting the effect of his every sentence. And at this, he saw Norine steal a hand of her uncle, pressing it firmly.

He knew now that more than idle curiosity lay back of those questions concerning Ethelbert Lawrence, and more firmly than ever he was determined to look the man up, as soon as might be.

During the rest of their journey, broken only once by the faint rattle of wheels and clatter of hoofs, as Joe Hooley drove the stage, with its curiously recovered team, back to the Slope, Galloway talked freely, hardly waiting to be questioned, but dwelling mainly upon the Never-fail Mine and its owners, past and present, shrewdly leaving little for Nathan Knight to question him about.

Then, as a sharp turn brought them in sight of the scattered lights marking the location of Gopher Slope, he changed the subject.

"Of course you'll not expect Fifth avenue accommodations, sir, but by putting up at the Pluribus Hotel, run by Darius Godkin, you'll find the best fare and neatest quarters the Slope can offer. I'll show you to the house, and if, after a night's trial, you think you can do better, why—"

"Do you ever stop there, Mr. Galloway?" asked Norine; then adding, as he bowed assent: "We'll stop at that house, then, uncle?"

Nathan Knight nodded assent, but his brows wrinkled sharply as he glanced from one face to the other. Of course this little fellow was doing his best to serve them, and had suffered some loss in yielding to their good, but—Surely Norine was not silly enough to fall in love with him—a gambler?"

Still, the very idea was enough to keep him silent until they came to the edge of the town, when an incident occurred that temporarily blotted out that disagreeable fancy.

"Two to one's no fair!" howled a drunken tough as he sprung out before the startled wayfarers, followed by several mates of the same stripe. "Rescue the petticoat, boys! An' mine's the fu'at kiss as pay!"

"Lay down, you brute!" gratingly cried Galloway, springing forward and sending out a fist straight from the shoulder, knocking the burly rascal endlong, then facing his startled mates, pistols in hand. "Back, you curs! Back, or I'll shoot—to kill!"

"Gallus Fred, by mighty!" howled one of the roughs, dodging as he wheeled in flight. "Skin out, boys, or we're— Don't shoot, sport!"

"Go on—straight to where you see the yellow lamp!" said Galloway, standing over the stunned knave. "That's the hotel. I'll see no one bothers you. Ask for Godkin, and say Fred Galloway recommended his place to you. Go—and go quickly!"

Nathan Knight obeyed, taking Norine with him, pausing not for her trembling appeal to the nervy little sport. And reaching the hotel in safety, they were gladdened by catching a glimpse of their defender, leisurely following, cool and seemingly entirely at his ease.

A few words were all that was required, and after registering for both himself and niece, Nathan Knight led Norine up the narrow flight of stairs, to the rooms shown them by the landlord.

Promising to send them supper, with hot coffee, Darius Godkin beat a hasty retreat downstairs, for Norine was so pale and trembled so violently, that he feared being called upon to assist a fainting woman!

"Oh, Uncle Nat!" sobbed the maiden, sinking down on the bed, covering her face with both trembling hands. "They've murdered him! My poor father! Dead—I know he is dead!"

Nathan Knight sat down by her side, gently caressing her bowed head, his own eyes moistened, and his voice far from steady as he endeavored to lend her some little encouragement.

"Don't give way so soon, little pet! Try to hope—try to bear up yet a little longer, dear. You've done nobly so far, and now—try to hope on! I believe he is still living, but if not—"

"If not—vengeance!" huskily cried Norine, lifting her head and dashing the burning tears from her eyes. "I swear vengeance upon each and every one who may have had part or lot in this foul crime! I give my life to that one end! If I ever falter, may Heaven forget me!"

CHAPTER XI.

BOUNCER BRAGG BEGINS TO "LOOM UP."

FOR the second time that evening, the Man of the Shells proved himself first to act in an emergency, and if he was too late to prevent that missile from taking full effect, his were the muscular arms which caught and saved the unfortunate boomer from falling to the sanded floor.

Only to relinquish his burden, to fling aloft his own hands as he reeled back, wildly crying: "Sufferin' Job o' b'ilin' miseryation! Valve wide open, yit his b'iler's 'xploded! An'—sech gas! Jest s-m-e-l-l!"

How could they help it? That particularly rank odor already filled the saloon, and ejaculations of angry surprise were changing to yells and hoots of mirth as those who had gathered more closely about the table utilized by Bouncer Bragg, shrunk away as from a pestilence.

"Rotten-aigged, or my smeller plays me dirt!" cried one of the citizens, and blending with his words came the ludicrous imitation of a cock-crow and hen-cackle combined, followed by the abrupt entree of a gaunt, muscular, rough-garbed figure.

"Hyar I come, cock-o'-the-walk, comb fresh painted an' sickle-feathers done up in frills! Hyar I be, jest laid a aigg, as a sample fer the young pullets to copy! An' I kin lick ary rooster as dast even to think 'hatchet,' much less wring it in!"

Again his nondescript slogan shrilled forth. Once more he cut a clumsy pigeon-wing, jarring the house as he came down on both heels, his arms akimbo, his hands on hips, close to the brace of revolvers strapped about his middle.

Accustomed as the majority of those present must have grown to "wild and woolly" ebullitions, none of them had recovered from the confusion into which they had been cast by the explosion of that ancient egg. Even Horace Bolster, ordinarily so jealous concerning the good order which was the rule under his reign, seemed knocked out of the ring for the moment.

"Whar's the impident critter who ketched my aigg?" howled the self-dubbed Cock-of-the-walk, his bearded chin thrust forward, his whisky-inflamed eyes glaring down a sharp-pointed nose from under the brim of his slouch-hat. "A rooster's aigg, mind ye! Wu'th its weight in di'monds, rest o' the deck throwed in fer good measure! Whar's the critter? Whar's the talkin' sign with a mouth so mighty big I tuck it fer a hay-mow, an' so laid my—ow-wow!"

Turn about is said to be fair play, and if that crowing roisterer had taken Bouncer Bragg and his audience completely by surprise, it was his turn now. For a vise-like grip closed on his thick neck from behind, and as the cold muzzle of a pistol fairly plugged up one ear, into its mate poured the stern words:

"Steady, you cur! Try to kick, and off goes your roof!"

"Hold on, I—"

"You bet I will!" with grim emphasis. "Hands up, I say!"

"Glory all over!" exploded Solemn Saul, as he caught sight of the person who had so utterly blocked the big joker's little game. "Ef it hain't the gas-spouter, I don't want a dollar! But—how come it so?"

More than one of those present felt like asking the same question, and probably would have done so had there been more time to spare.

They had heard the peculiar explosion as the surely-aimed missile struck Bouncer Bragg squarely in the face, just then turned toward the door as he invited those bashful lingerers to enter and share the glad tidings he was spreading, free of cost. They saw him reel back, blindly fling up his hands, overcome by that disgusting odor. And not one of them all caught another glimpse of the boomer until he rose up behind the muscular ruffian, to fasten his grip upon his bull-neck.

"Steady, both o' ye!" sternly cried Race Bolster, rallying quickly. "I run this place, and I'll the down man who pulls trigger before—"

"Fair play is all I ask," just as sternly cried Bragg, never casting so much as a glance in that direction, giving his whole attention to the egg-tosser. "Maybe you can drop me, but not quick enough to save this whelp from gitting his just deserts. Steady, you knave!"

"Gi' me a show fer—"

"All right!" and Bouncer Bragg gave up his advantage so far as to break hold, springing lightly back until no one could strike at him from the rear, without first betraying his evil intention. "Hands up, as you've got 'em!" he added, sternly. "Try to touch a gun, an' I'll lay ye out for the cooling-board!"

"Give way—stand back, gentlemen!" growled Race Bolster, pushing forward, pausing when almost in line with those two men. "You heard me say I'll have no shooting in here, didn't you—both?"

"Disarm him, then," coldly answered Bragg, keeping his enemy covered with steady hand. "Take away his guns, and we'll argue the point; but not before!"

For a single breath Race Bolster paused, his keen eyes flashing from one face to the other, but then his decision was made. The pledge he had so recently given Hugh Chadwick, came back to his mind, and seeing a chance to learn more about the stranger whose appearance had so strongly affected his friend, he acted accordingly.

"Flag of truce, both of ye," he said, lifting an empty hand. "If I can settle this without killing, I'm duty-bound to have it that way. And so—just what do you ask of Shanghai, stranger?"

"Nothing of him, at present. Of you, sir, that you take away his guns, unless you want your floor painted red, as well as spotted yellow!"

"Don't you try it, Race Bolster!" growled the gaunt giant. "The dug-gun critter jest wants to ketch me 'thout my tools, an'—"

"Shut, Shang Draper! If I strip him, stranger, you'll give up your tools, as well?"

"With pleasure, on your word of honor that he really is unarmed."

"All right, then. Shanghai, you'd ought to know what it comes to when I say—*business*!"

That was all, in words, but Race Bolster replaced his own weapon, showing not a trace of fear as he stepped forward to search the big fellow, though Shanghai Draper seemed able to "eat him up" without half-trying.

It was trading on a well-worn reputation, but the result fairly justified the Bon Ton Sport. He disarmed the sullen giant, passing the belt of arms, together with an ugly-looking knife which he plucked from a hidden sheath between the big fellow's shoulders, over to the barkeeper. And then, as the final result of his search, he held gingerly aloft two discolored eggs!

"Tetch lightly, boss!" squealed Saul Sunday, shrinking back with hand ready to grasp his thin nose. "Ef they're loaded like t'other was, I want to hunt my hole afore they hatch!"

"I'll pay double what any other man offers for those eggs!" called out the Boomer, quickly. "Put them in a safe place, dear sir, then come and take my tools. I reckon we can finish up this monkey circus with a bit of quiet talk, unless Shanghai is altogether unreasonable."

"More bad gas!" groaned the Sad Man, dejectedly, as Race Bolster seemed to accept that cool suggestion. "Sufferin' Moses! ef the 'Sylum was on'y open fer guests! Ef I on'y mought—"

His doleful plaint was left unfinished, as Bouncer Bragg, disarmed by the deft hands of Race Bolster, quietly stepped nearly within reach of the sullen, half-bewildered Draper, one forefinger emphasising each sentence as they flowed across his lips:

"Now to business, my gentle rooster! I never met you before, and I'm open to lay odds that you'll never want to meet me again, after I've called quits with you, this night!"

"Puttin' on a heap sight o' frills, hain't ye, critter?"

"No more than I can afford starch for stiffening, Shanghai. Now you button up, until I've made my meaning perfectly clear. After that, you may take your turn, unless your stomach goes back on you."

"I came here, on legitimate business. I asked for and won permission to sing my little song to a collection of gentlemen. But you—you went out of your way to foully insult a stranger."

"You axed me to come in, an' I come, didn't I?" with a half-grin, as he took note of that egg-matted beard.

"I bade all bashful gentlemen to enter without fear. You are not a gentleman, and your laying claim to that honorable title proves you a liar, just as your crowing branded you a braggart, and your casting a representation of yourself from under cover, marks you cur and coward."

"Steady, Draper!" warningly called forth Race Bolster, as the big fellow half-crouched for a leap upon his adversary.

"Shell I stand an' take sech— Let up, boss!"

"Empty words can't hurt your bark, Shang—"

hai, and I'm holding him as level as I mean to hold you. Hear him out, then you can chip."

"Thanks, gentle sir," with a side-bow, but without removing his keen gaze from the face of his assailant. "If I ever forget your courtesy to me, a pilgrim and a stranger, may I never more behold Blissful Buttes and their manifold delights! And as for you, Shanghai Draper, I repeat: liar, braggart, cur and craven! You struck from cover, then added insult to injury by openly boasting of your foul—with a u!—exploit."

"I ought to have shot you. I had a perfect right to have done so. I will shoot you, on sight, unless you consent to the bargain which I am magnanimous enough to offer you, first. Will you agree?"

"What to, dug-gun ye?" sulkily growled the big fellow.

"Well, there's nothing like sport, and judging from your hilarious debut, a bit ago, you seem to be fairly overflowing with fun. True, your little jest has not panned out precisely according to expectations, but that's because it had a fool for an engineer."

"I'll fool you, ef you'll jest step outside, whar Race Bolster cain't play like he was king o' creation—dug-gun ye, critter."

"Button, chicken! Your time to chirp hasn't come around. Am I asking anything more than the rights you guaranteed me, Mr. Bolster, before I resigned the drop?"

"You've got the floor, Mr. Bragg. Stand and take it, Draper!"

"Thanks, awfully! And so—to resume, White-feather: You went out of your way to kick up a row, as I hinted once before. You took a most disgusting method of doing it, too, though that ought to be looked for, considering the source."

"Cut it short, darn ye!" growled the giant. "Ye cain't hold me hyar, like this, all night long, an' ye don't want to think it, nuther!"

"If it's rather slow a-comin', Dung-hill, maybe you'll find the waltz lively enough when it gets on deck," blandly chuckled the Boomer from Blissful Buttes, keen enough to see that the majority of those present were hugely enjoying the discomfiture of his antagonist. "But business goes, since you're so eager for the test."

"Taking you as you stand, you're half again as big as I am, and look as though you weigh full forty pounds the heavier. You came prancing on deck, just as though you considered yourself a fighting-cock of the purest feather. If that meant anything more than empty bluster, you ought to be able to hold your end level in a scrap with a common plug—like me, for instance?"

"Mebbe you'd like me to prove it?" broke forth the gangling giant with poorly-bidden eagerness, his blood-shot eyes glittering wickedly.

"Then you are worth something—in your own mind?" drawled the boomer, with provoking innocence of face and tones.

"I kin down you at ary sort o' doin's you dast to name!"

"I want to know! Well, you may mean it all, but whether or no you are truthful, for a change, remains to be seen. I'll give you a chance to make your boast good, however, and here it comes, in words plain enough for even a fool of your dimensions to comprehend."

"I'll tackle you, at your best holt, Mr. Bolster to stand umpire and sole judge, for just five minutes' obediencel!"

"What d'ye mean by that?" suspiciously demanded Draper, recoiling a trifle, like one scenting a cunning trap for his feet.

"Precisely what I say; that I'll meet you at whatever sport, barring knives or guns for the present, you may deem yourself the best fitted for. If I know you, fairly and squarely, then I'll have you at my disposal for just five minutes, by the watch. If you down me, I'll obey your orders to the very letter, for the same length of time. Can I say fairer than that?"

Still the big fellow hesitated, fearing to admit too much, and so he suspiciously demanded:

"What ye 'low to ax me, s'posin' ye win? What ye mean, critter?"

"Just this: if you decline this chance, I'll shoot you like a dog!"

CHAPTER XII.

HOW THE BOOMER "PLAYED EVEN."

SHARP and clear came the threat, and not one of all who heard him give it utterance, doubted his perfect earnestness for even an instant.

"I reckon you'd better jump at the chance, Shanghai," dryly spoke up Race Bolster, after a single keen glance at that egg-marked face. "I shon't, in your place."

"Then you reckon they hain't no dug-gun trick into it, boss?"

"If there is, I'll be the first to call him down," came the cold response. "You understand, Mr. Bragg?"

"And gladly accept your assurance, sir," with a profound bow and grateful smile. "All I ask for is a fair chance to play even with a dirty whelp who, having offended the nostrils of all gentlemen present, ought to go down on his knees for a chance being offered him to gratify their other senses."

"Mournful Jemima!" croaked Solemn Saul, in a dejected aside, both hands and eyes uplifting in sad admiration. "Ef I could on'y ketch his gift o' gab, how turrible quick that blessed 'Sylum would climb to the skies! Ef I on'y—but sech luck never comes in the way o' sech a mis'able critter as me!"

"Ef you'll see it's a fair shake, Bolster, I'm more'n willin' to try the fool' critter a hustle!" eagerly spoke up Draper. "I kin do him up ary way he kin name! I kin—"

"Name your own medicine, Bluffer," crisply interposed Bragg. "I want to make it taste as bitter as possible, so select your best holt, mind."

"Did ye ever wrestle with a thoroughbred, critter?"

"Is that your election, sir?"

"Ketch the best ye know how—yes! An' ef I don't crack the fool neck o' ye, then I'll—"

"Do the other thing, no doubt. Well, I'll make a stagger at it, even if you have picked out my one weak point," chuckled the Boomer from Blissful Buttes, beginning to remove his coat as the first step in preparing for the test of skill and muscle. "You fully understand the stake, referee?"

"I've got it noted down in my brain, and I'll see that the loser pays forfeit. Still, I'm rather sorry for you, stranger!"

"May I ask just why, dear sir?"

"Well, Shang's a mighty good man at a hug, and after his playing you such dirt, I'd like to see you stand at least half a show!"

"I'll make a bull show out o' him, you bet ye!" chuckled Draper, viciously, as he stripped to the buff from his waist upward.

"I'll prove the meekest monkey you ever taught to play circus, Mr. Draper, when you win my five minutes. But—you haven't won them yet!"

"Dollar ag'inst dollar that he never don't, nuther!" suddenly broke forth the man of sorrow, his old-time gambling blood roused by the prospect of sport. "An' I'll go bu'st ef ary critter hes sand 'nough to match my boodle, too!"

That set the betting afoot, and by the time all those who wished to invest their money had made their wagers, the two men stood with cautiously weaving arms, sparring for a favorable opening.

It seemed a terrible unequal match, taking the weight and height of both men into consideration. Then, too, Shanghai Draper was known to be a more than fair wrestler according to the rules governing the style he had nominated. All this gained the big fellow by far the most backers, but Race Bolster was not one of them.

After giving the stripped boomer a keenly critical glance, he nodded his wishes to his bar-keeper, and that worthy took each bet as fast as it was offered, until the excited crowd realized whose judgment they were bucking against. Then wagers ceased, and calls for the test grew numerous.

Once the antagonists were facing each other inside that human ring, the suspense was short. For, confident in his greater size and weight, and fancying he could detect amateurish signs in the movements of his adversary, Shanghai leaped to a close, and the rival athletes began a fierce struggle for the fall.

Exerting his really great strength, Draper jerked Bragg clear from the floor, whirling him around, to fling him back downward, when his added weight would surely bring the requisite "three points" in contact with the sand-boarded boards. Instead—and just how it came about, not one of those looking on could clearly explain—Bouncer Bragg struck the floor upon his feet, with his arms locked about that bony chest and his shoulders eating into Draper's ribs!

Then, with a mighty heave and toss, the big fellow was whirled over in the air, falling on the broad of his back, with a shock that caused the glassware to dance and jingle merrily back of the bar!

"Four points down, and first fall taken by Bragg!" called forth the Bon Ton Sport, grave as a deacon at prayer, though a merry twinkle in his dark brown eyes told how surely he counted his money landed.

"Give him the regular rest, but I hardly think he will ask for another trial," quietly said the representative of Blissful Buttes.

"Air—whisky—I'm all—broke up!" gasped Draper, falling back as he strove to regain his feet.

Aid was lent him, and after a couple of drinks of liquor were stowed away where they promised to do him the most service, Draper fully justified the prediction given by his antagonist.

"I cain't—he didn't do it," was his lame explanation. "My hoof slipped on the sand, an' I ketched a twist that—"

"You still live, my fine fellow, and are fully able to pay the penalty you hoped to exact from me," coldly said Bouncer Bragg, once more dressed, seemingly untroubled by the foul odor which permeated his clothing as well as hair and matted beard. "I claim my rights. You must be my slave for five minutes, by the watch."

You must do and say everything or word I command. If you refuse, I'll kill you with as scant mercy as I would show to a mad-dog that tried to bite me!"

"I hain't fit fer—what ye want, darn ye?" snarled Draper.

"I want to play even for the dirty trick you played on me. I want the stake I wrestled you for, on your own terms, and I mean to have them, too!"

"He's right, Shanghai," nodded Race Bolster. "Pay up, or never a one in all Gopher Slope will lift a finger to save your scalp!"

"I'll never rob him of so many congenial companions, bowed the victor, with a wry grimace which drew a fleeting smile even to the melancholy visage of the Sad Man. "I'll leave him his limbs, for he'll need them all for scratching: gravel with his feet; never mind about his fingers! I'll not take his life, for I've no particular grudge against the hangman. But I will claim his blind obedience for the limit set, and I trust Mr. Bolster will hold the watch on us."

Though still sulky, Draper seemed a bit encouraged by that glib list of exceptions. He chafed at the biting hints, but a single glance over the company gathered, warned him against too openly repudiating his compact, after having so greedily accepted the conditions.

"I'll even up with ye, critter!" he snarled with a vicious show of teeth. "I'm too white a man to go back on a barg'in, but—I'll pay ye out, ef my chaine don't come 'round fer twenty year!"

"I'll try to be near when you ask a final settlement, Mr. Draper," bowed Bragg, with bland good will. "Just say when you're ready to play automaton, and Mr. Bolster will call time on us both."

"Git it over with, dug-gun ye!"

"Ready!" cried Bolster, taking out his watch and springing it open. "Now—time!"

"Thanks, awfully!" bowed the Boomer from Blissful Buttes, seemingly in no great haste to begin his performance. "And now, slave, to begin with, oblige your master by treating the company to the best the bar affords. Shell out your coin!"

The laugh which greeted this speech, proved how solidly the Boomer had struck the general sympathy, and the effect was by no means lessened by the vicious snarl with which the victim complied. And when Bragg snatched his canvas pouch away, tossing it on the bar, a united cheer greeted his words:

"Shanghai pays for everything, as long as his weasel can stand it, gentlemen! Drink hearty, and while you're doing that, I'll put my new servant through his paces, to suit my own ideas of fitness."

"I'll hev a pint o' yer blood fer every dollar it—"

"Shut up, slave!" sharply interposed Bragg, striking those lips with the tips of his fingers. "Speak when you are spoken to, and I reckon you'll find enough occupation for your tongue. To begin with, where did you find that egg you loaned me, first-off?"

"Out in the bresh," sulkily muttered the big fellow.

"What breed of fowl do you reckon deposited it there?"

"Sage hen, I reckon. You'd ought to know, bein's you tasted it!"

"No remarks, Mr. Ferguson! But we'll let those eggs rest, for the present. You paused long enough at the entrance, I believe, to catch an inkling of my lecture, did you not?"

"Waal, I hearn you blowin' 'bout some sort o' Buttes," speaking a little more freely now, for, barring the loss of his money, he was escaping far more lightly than he had dared hope for, bearing in mind the sort of penalty he had intended to exact from the Boomer, had he won the right to command.

"Just so: of Blissful Buttes, the center of creation, the hub of the universe, the sum total of all earthly delights, with a fair sprinkling of paradise thrown in, just to make it more binding!"

"I was advising all within sound of my voice to take time by the forelock, and migrate thither, but I forgot that even Paradise had its devil, and just so I failed to count upon such an abortion as Shanghai Draper! Now—take your solemn oath that you will never, no never! venture a single mile nearer Blissful Buttes than your are at this identical instant! Swear, slave!"

"Shell I cuss right out, boss?" grinned Draper.

"No. On second thoughts, promise that you will start in the morning for the Buttes. You couldn't tell the truth if you tried, and this way I'll make sure you'll never play devil in my paradise!"

"All right: I'll go thar, in the mornin'," nodded the giant.

"Good enough! Now stand still, and don't move a peg until I come back. I'll not keep you waiting long, for— How much time have I left, referee?"

"Two minutes, even."

"Plenty, and to spare," laughed Bragg, making his way to the bar, where he whispered a

few words to the white-aproned assistant, who passed him what he requested.

"Now, slave," resumed the Boomer as he once more took position in front of his victim for the time being, lifting his hands to display the two eggs which Bolster had taken from the giant. "You called yourself a gamecock, and declared you knew how to lay eggs, equal to an old hen. Unless you lied, you should be a fair judge of hen-fruit. You threw away one, evidently a relative of these two. Am I right?"

"Don't ye dast to paste me with them dug-gun things!" snarled the big fellow, shrinking back until brought to bay by a leveled revolver in the left hand of the Boomer, who sternly cried:

"Stand up to the rack, Shang. Draper, or I'll 'paste' you with a blue pill! Open your mouth, slave."

"Gi' me a gun, an' I'll—"

"Open I say! Refuse, and I'll blow your brains out!"

With a snarling curse the giant obeyed, for those blazing eyes said their owner would surely make his threat good unless he was given his full pound of flesh. And, an instant later, the big fellow dared not even attempt to whisper, for one of those over-ripe eggs was deftly popped into his mouth, shell and all.

"I'd give a penny—with a hole in it—if your best girl could only catch a glimpse of you this minute, beauty!" chuckled Bragg, then catching that drooping chin with his left hand, he opened that cavity still further.

No need of the pistol, now. Draper dared not move a muscle, lest he hasten the awful catastrophe.

"I reckon there's room for another, with a little crowding," said Bragg, pressing the second egg after its mate. "If not, chew up the first, and swallow it—just so!"

The second egg was balanced between Draper's teeth, and as he uttered those two words, Bouncer Bragg struck his victim a sharp rap with his knuckles on the tip of the chin, the jar causing both eggs to burst.

Shanghai Draper reeled back, choking, strangling, to trip and fall.

CHAPTER XIII.

A BRACE OF ODDITIES.

A YELL of laughter went forth from the spectators, none the less hearty because Race Bolster, whose duties as time-keeper had interfered with his beating a retreat to a safe distance, had suffered to some slight extent when those ancient shells exploded.

But the Bon Ton Sport never flinched, never removed his gaze from the dial of his watch, where the second-hand was rapidly measuring off the last minute bargained for.

The stench was almost unbearable to all, but of course Shanghai Draper suffered by far the most severely. That stroke had helped confine his jaws, and at least a portion of the vile compound had forced its way down his throat, choking, strangling him, sending him blindly back, to trip and fall with a jar that shook the house.

"Shut your front gate, Shanghai!" called out Bragg, mockingly. "Your eggs are hatching, and if the chicks take after their sire, they're runaways from the shell! Pity to lose—Will you?"

With a hoarse, strangling roar, the big fellow scrambled to his feet, and driven beside himself by all that he had been forced to undergo, made a tigerish rush at his tormentor.

Bouncer Bragg made no effort to escape that wicked onset, though more than one of the crowd whose sympathies he had so thoroughly won, joined in a cry of warning. Instead, he threw his body forward to meet the rush, checking it with a straight left-hander, then smashing in Draper squarely between the eyes with his right fist. Nothing more was called for. Lifted fairly off his feet, the big fellow was dashed backward, his head and shoulders first to strike the floor, just as Race Bolster closed his watch with a snap and sharply called out:

"Time's up, gentlemen!"

"So's the gent, but dug-gun ef t'other 'ne is!" almost hilariously commented the Man of the Shells.

Bouncer Bragg cast a single keen glance toward his defeated adversary, which assured him he had not miscalculated the force of his blows. Shanghai Draper, while not seriously injured, was past giving more trouble for the time being.

"Gentlemen, the circus is over, so far as I am concerned," he spoke, with a comprehensive bow. "'Twas a rather highly-scented performance, but you can hardly fault me for that. So, thanking you all for your kind forbearance, and apologizing to Mr. Bolster in particular for—"

"Never mention it, sir!" cordially interposed the Bon Ton Sport, his right hand coming forth to clasp that of the Blissful Buttes representative. "I can stand it if my customers can, and then," with a low, amused chuckle that pointed his meaning, "I reckon a few of them will contribute their mite toward cleaning up and purifying the place!"

"Nickels, dimes an' dollars!" croaked the thimble-rigger. "Ye cain't win ef ye don't

bet, but it's the wise man who takes time to pick out the pure-bred from the dung-hill!"

"Thar's one as don't feel nigh so mighty much like crowin' as he tried to make out a bit ago!" laughed one of the sports, calling attention to Draper, who was struggling to a sitting posture, the very image of dazed and dizzy dilapidation.

Bouncer Bragg had aimed his blows to mark, rather than stun, and he was not surprised at this prompt recovery on the part of his enemy. At his first attempt to arise, the Boomer possessed himself of the belt of arms, and the knife which Race Bolster had taken from the giant, stepping quickly back to drop them into the lap of his adversary, saying in cold, distinct tones:

"There's your arsenal, Shanghai Draper! Your five minutes of slavery have expired, and I'll not give you a chance to plead defenselessness as an excuse for not chawing me up. Now—fair warning!"

Draper had mechanically caught at his guns when he felt them fall across his legs, but at that sharp challenge, his unsteady hands fell away, his bony figure shrinking, his husky voice gasping:

"I don't—I hain't fit fer—*augh—gh-h!*"

"Bet he don't hanker fer aiggs inside of a week!" laughed one of the amused company.

"Choke'er down, Shang! That om'lette hes cost ye right smart dollars a'ready, boy!"

Draper groaned afresh as he realized what scant sympathy he could expect to receive from the crowd, and when that general laugh died away, Bouncer Bragg picked up the broken thread, like one who had just so much to say, and cared little how long that saying consumed.

"I'd lie if I said that I'm sorry to see you suffering, Shanghai Draper, though I claim to carry as tender a heart as men in these days can well afford to support. You brought all this upon your own head, and any reasonably honest man will say you've come off heap sight easier than you had any right to expect.

"You went out of your way to insult and injure a perfect stranger, whom you fancied you could bully to suit your own taste. I have simply played even, taking your own choice of tools. I did this mainly to show you up to all in your true colors: a liar, fool, coward and cur!"

"I fancy I have succeeded, and now—if you are mad enough to call for a new deal, I'll make swift and sure work of it. I'll kill you, or you shall kill me!"

"I'll kill you, jest so shore—"

"Stop!" almost fiercely cried Race Bolster, once more master of the situation, his pistols out and ready for business. "There's been too much foolishness here, already, and unless you fellows mean straight business, the quicker you pull out of my place, the less risk you'll run of losing a shingle from your roofs!"

"Didn't the dug-gun critter mash—*augh!*" gulped Draper, with difficulty holding his stomach in check, as he slowly rose to his feet. "I'll kill him fer that, ef it takes my own—*augh!*"

"And you, stranger?"

"Just as I stated: if he wishes to press the matter, I'll kill him, or he'll have to lay me out for keeps," coldly bowed the Boomer.

"All right. You both appear to be in much the same mind, and since matters have gone so far, I reckon it'll save bother to wind 'er up without wasting more good minutes. But—everything's got to run according to Gunter, you mind? I'll see that you take an even start, then leave the outcome to good luck or better management."

"I'm sure we couldn't ask for a better manager," bowed Bragg.

Draper said nothing. He was on his feet, but from the convulsive working of his throat, all could see that it was but a question of moments how much longer he would be able to retain what he had involuntarily swallowed after that explosion.

Probably it was this that lent Bouncer Bragg so much cold ferocity, but be that as it may, his answer was ready when Bolster asked:

"Since you're both bound to fight, how would you rather have it?"

"Short, sharp and sure, if not exactly sweet! We shall both be stripped to the buff. We shall each be given a knife, then turned into a dark room or cellar, without windows, and with the door locked behind us. That door shall not be opened until sunrise, to-morrow. Then, if either one of us still lives, he shall give the corpse a decent burial."

Shanghai Draper stared stupidly at the speaker, and a little murmur of incredulous surprise ran around the room. Even Race Bolster seemed a bit taken back by such savage conditions, for he asked, dubiously:

"I reckon you know what such a lay-out would 'mount to, stranger?"

"Death for one or both, of course," with a bow and cool smile. "If I ever enter a duel, it's got to be one worthy the title. If Draper insists on getting even, these are the only terms on which I'll stoop so low as to meet him. Of course, if he prefers to risk a street row, I'll do my best to hold my end level!"

"I cain't—I'm sick—" hoarsely croaked the giant; and he most assuredly was not pleading

an imaginary excuse, judging from the hasty manner in which the big fellow was "bounced" by the proprietor.

"Go take a walk, Shanghai!" Bolster cried, harshly, gripping Draper by collar and seat, running him rapidly across the floor and out at the open door.

Too sick at stomach, where ancient eggs and strong whisky felt bound to create a disturbance, the giant made no struggle, and as he was swallowed up by the night, certain sounds came back which assured all present that the Bon Ton Sport had not acted any too promptly.

"I'd linger, at least long enough to repeat my sincere regrets, Mr. Bolster," bowed the Boomer, "if I did not feel that, just at present, I'm a standing insult to all reputable nostrils! May I hope for a sweeter reception, after I've changed my perfume?"

"The Bon Ton door is open to all decent men, strangers or not," a little stiffly bowed the proprietor. "The only condition being that they behave themselves, or accept the consequences."

"Thanks! I'll disguise my present self, and call again on the morrow. Just now—I fear I really ought to take a bath!"

"Me too!" croaked Solemn Saul, adding to the general laugh by his awkward imitation of those graceful bows and genuflections with which the man from Blissful Buttes left the saloon.

Bouncer Bragg was hastening away in the direction of the little stream which supplied the Slope with water for various purposes, but the keen eye of Saul Sunday singled him out from other shadows, and he cried aloud, wildly brandishing his metal-bound staff toward that hurrying shape:

"I say, you critter! Hold on a minute, cain't ye?"

"Don't stop me, man!" sharply answered Bragg, with a glance over a shoulder. "I've been so busy that I forgot to wash at my customary hour, and now—nothing less than a river can do me any good!"

"Me too!" croaked Solemn Saul, quickening his strides until he was at the side of the Boomer from Blissful Buttes. "Mebbe I wouldn't 'a' noticed it so soon, ef you hedn't spoke, but I reckon I *did* ketch a few splatters o' aigg when you tuck that tumble. Didn't hurt ye, reckon?"

"Don't—I'm fighting my stomach as it is!" Gaining the pure, fresh night air seemed to intensify that disgusting odor, but the Sad Man refused to take the hint, now that his native bashfulness had taken a back seat.

"I say, pardner," he croaked, in a stage whisper, one hand curved alongside his lips: "What lay be *you* on—honest?"

"You heard, didn't you?" sharply. "I'm a professional boomer, and I'm paid for working up the interests of—never you mind just who!"

"Thar's money in it, then?"

"Enough to keep me from starving, of course. I get a dollar a head for every new-comer to the Buttes, and a fair per cent. on all investments they may make."

"You don't say!" ejaculated Sunday, as they cleared the town and hastened along toward the now not distant stream, flowing between fairly high banks.

"I thought I *did*! Now—what is *your* specialty, gentle sir?"

"My—oh! Jest tryin' fer to work off a cuss that's planted gray sprouts all over the cabeza o' me! That's bowed my figger so crooked I cain't look straight ahead unless I straddle my two laigs wide open, an' pin both coat-tails to my collar! That's made a old man o' me long afore—Ef I tumble, ketch me, pard!"

They had gained the nearest bank, and as a dark cloud drifted in front of the moon just then, Solemn Saul with difficulty saved himself from taking a header down the rocky descent.

The sight of flowing water caused Bouncer Bragg to hasten forward, dropping to his knees on a narrow strip of sand, where he fell to vigorously scrubbing his face and bristling beard.

Water alone seemed incapable of washing away that disgusting odor, as Solemn Saul likewise discovered on making the effort, but he croaked forth, stealing time for a glance toward his companion:

"I've hearn tell thar's nothin' like sand, pardner! Mebbe it'll sorter take the raw aidge off, ef we keep it up long—*Augh!*"

Teeth and grit make uncomfortable associates, and after that first experiment the Sad Man was content to devote his attention to doing, not talking.

Apart from its cleansing properties, the water, coming cool from its mountain birthplace, felt particularly agreeable to his heated skin; and with all the ardor of a barefooted urchin in mid-summer wading, he dipped and scrubbed, then began it all over again, giving vent to puffs and grunts which would not have disgraced a gram-pus.

"I say, pardner!" he spluttered, at length, fumbling for a kerchief as he turned his face toward—vacancy!

CHAPTER XIV.

VERIFYING AN OLD ADAGE.

SOLEMN SAUL knelt there on the damp sands, like a statue of amazement, staring at the spot

where Bouncer Bragg had been, but where he was no longer.

He dashed a sleeve across his water-obscured vision, but the result remained the same. The Boomer from Blissful Buttes was gone, without sign, sound or warning.

Snatching up his staff, Sunday sprung for the nearest cover, one hand gripping a pistol-butt as he both listened and looked, inwardly trying to solve that unexpected puzzle.

Why had Bouncer Bragg stolen away? For that was what it surely amounted to; had he beaten a retreat with no more than ordinary caution, those keen ears would surely have taken warning.

"What fer? Why so? Is he got me kivered, right now? Waal, critter, you want to make a center-shot the fu'st try, fer you'll never live long 'nough to take a second!"

Not a sound came to his strained ears, beyond the faint lip-lip of the flowing stream, broken here and there by the dark crest of a rock or boulder. Not a moving object could those keen eyes detect, though never before had their owner put them to a sharper strain.

"He's gone—but which way? An' why for? That's the question!"

Knowing that Bouncer Bragg could not possibly have passed him on that narrow beach without discovery, Solemn Saul knew just as well that unless the Boomer was lying hidden among the rocks with which that bank was lined, he must have scaled the rise below where they had both struck the river; so the Sad Man began cautiously backing away from his covert, going up-stream until he felt reasonably secure from a shot, supposing the stranger had sanguinary intentions.

"It hardly looks that way, or why 'didn't he paste me one while I was scrubbin' the mug o' me? But—durn the critter! He's playin' some sort o' gum-game, dead sure!"

Keeping his person well covered by one side of a narrow cut in the bank, Solemn Saul crawled upward until his eyes could steal a glance across the level which lay between the river and the town, only broken here and there by an occasional patch of rock-croppings.

"Sufferin' Moses!" muttered the Sad Man, as his keen eyes caught sight of—was it more than one? "Ef thar ain't the dum critter, I'll chaw my hat, an' call it beef!"

A fleecy cloud was just creeping in front of the full moon, but even with that slowly fading light, Solemn Saul managed to satisfy himself that there were two figures—both men, almost as a matter of course—slowly moving across the level, not more than a couple of hundred yards away from where he clung to the bank, his head alone raised above the edge.

"Comin' or goin'?" he asked himself, at the same time slipping up over the bank, lying flat along his stomach. "Ef one's that pesky critter, how'd he know 't'other was waitin' fer him to show up? Ef not him, then whar's he gone to—an' why so?"

By this time the deeper portion of the cloud had crept over the face of the moon, casting the earth into obscurity for the time being, but the light had lasted long enough to show Solemn Saul a rocky tract lying nearly in a line between himself and those slowly moving shapes, and with the skillful ease of an Indian scout, the Sad Man stole forward, crouching so low as to blend his person with the earth itself.

He gained the rocks before the cloud drifted away from the moon, and his pulse beat just a trifle faster than ordinary as he caught a faint sound: too indistinct for even his keen ears to make out a word, though he knew it was the voice of a man talking.

Crouching close to one of the rocks, Solemn Saul waited impatiently for the moon to shine forth once more, for his ears warned him that the speaker was drawing nearer his covert. Then, as the cloud drifted clear, he stole a cautious peep, to be rewarded by a glimpse of his game, hardly two-score yards distant!

Whoever they might prove to be, the men had come to a halt at the further edge of the rocky tract, facing each other, one gesticulating vigorously as he spoke to his companion.

"Jest come fer a pow-wow!" decided Solemn Saul, drawing back his head after a hasty glance at them, and another as to the chance of gaining a better covert for hearing their words. "Mebbe I hain't got no right, but I'll resk tryin', jest fer luck!"

Taking no long chances, but using considerable celerity, for all that, the Sad Man shifted his location, and before five minutes had elapsed, he was near enough to catch each word as it fell from those, as yet, unidentified lips.

It took but a few moments for Solemn Saul to make one discovery: neither of these men could be Bouncer Bragg, whose mysterious vanishment had led him to what promised to turn out an adventure of no mean importance.

"The jedge, by glory!" was his first decision, followed almost immediately by the recognition of a second voice: "An' the tall critter they called the marshal!"

At first it was difficult for the eavesdropper to catch the right thread, for, curious as it may appear, he had heard nothing, known nothing of the excitement which stirred up one half of

Gopher Slope without disturbing the "circus" to the Bon Ton Saloon.

"Just that!" Hugh Chadwick was saying, his voice lowered, but full of an angry resentment. "How the devil found it out is more than I can even guess, but I'm out a clean five thousand, none the less!"

"You don't reckon Hooley gave it away?" hesitated Dave Arnold.

"If he did, I'll have the worth of his pelt out of it, anyway! Not that the loss will break me, or even give much inconvenience, mind ye, Dave! It's the way the trick was turned that galls! And I'll give an even half of the amount to the man that nabs the thief, provided he is brought to me alive. You understand?"

"It's worth tryin' for, and I'll see what I can do about bringing the fellow to book. But—this isn't what you brought me out here for, judge?"

"Not entirely. Dave, I reckon I can trust you?" hesitatingly asked Chadwick.

"I'll leave you to be the judge of that. I will say, though, that I'd rather croak than cross you in aught, Chadwick!"

"I believe it. This isn't the first time we've—I say, David, who is that fellow who called himself Bouncer Bragg, to-night?"

"You tell! He's a new-comer. I saw him first this forenoon, but I couldn't place him. You don't reckon he's crooked, do you?"

"I wish I could think he wasn't!"

"Well, he couldn't have been one of those who held up Hooley, for I saw him after the break-away, and—by George! What's the matter with Hungry Mike, and the fellow who yanked his neck out of a noose, being your game, judge?"

"I've thought of that, and I reckon they are. But I'm bothered even more about this other one; did you notice his resemblance to any person you ever used to know, Arnold?"

"No, I didn't," slowly replied the city marshal. "What other do you mean, judge?"

"I wish I could say! Of course, I was knocked too near silly by Dobson for anything like close observation, but I can't get it out of my head that I ought to know the rascal! Could that beard of his have been a false one, do you reckon, Dave?"

"If so, he's a rare 'un! I hardly think it, though, for I gave him a mighty close search, at first sight. Still, if you reckon it'll be worth while, I can easy run him in for that row, you know."

Hugh Chadwick remained silent for a minute or more, seemingly weighing that suggestion; but then he rejected it.

"I'd rather not go quite that far, just yet, Dave. If all else fails, we'll have that to fall back on. What I would like, though, is for you to find out where the fellow came from last and what his real business is. You will do this, Arnold?"

"I can try, judge. Still, if I knew just why you suspicion the fellow, I could go to work with a better chance. Not that I want to pry into your secrets, if you have any, but—you catch on, judge?"

"Well, you know I'm thinking of selling out. I've made an offer through my broker in New York, and I didn't know but what the company had sent this fellow on to spy out the lay of the ground. Of course I'm giving 'em a square deal, but I hate to feel that I'm being watched and shadowed like a thief."

"Anybody would, of course. All right, judge. I'll keep an eye on the gent, and if I don't bring his real hide to light, it'll not be for lack of trying. Now—anything else?"

"Yes. That fellow who helped upset Mike."

"The man with the shell game? He's a fakir, plain enough, and if you don't fancy his looks, nothing's easier than to nail him tight, or run him out of town in a burry."

"Your judgment is pretty safe to bank on, as a rule, Dave, but I can't help thinking you're 'way off, to-night!"

"You reckon this one is more than he looks, judge?" with a touch of sarcasm underlying his words. "Two of a kind, so to speak!"

"It does seem like crowding the mourners," with a short, dry laugh that told he did not overlook the point. "I suppose I ought to be giving him thanks for saving my life. No doubt he did spoil Dobson's aim. But—all the same—if he isn't something more than he tries to make out, with his shells, and his whines, and his fool chatter about his Asylum, then I'll owe up beat."

"It may be, of course. I didn't mean that he was quite the crazy rat he played. Thimble-rigging is such an ancient game that the man who hopes to make a living by it, must do something to soap it down. This fellow plays the crank wilder than the majority, but I really reckon he's no worse than the ruck and rabble."

"That may be, but I'm fixed just now so that I can't well afford to run any unnecessary risks. Two such oddities couldn't well hit a little town like Gopher Slope at the same time, and play in together as smoothly as they did, without having an understanding beforehand."

"There's something in that, judge. Shall I nail the fakir, then?"

"No, not just yet. You know men you can trust to do the work: set them on his track, while

you look after the other. Shadow both, night and day. Don't let them smoke the trick, but see that all they say or do is taken note of. See who they appear most intimate with, and—but you ought to be able to make out just what I wish, from what I have already said, Arnold?"

"I reckon I catch on, judge. I'll do the best I know how, and if I don't turn 'em up as what you seem to suspect, I'll make sure they don't trouble you in person."

"That's all right, then. If I've left out anything of importance—as I may, for my head is aching fit to split—I'll see you again in the morning."

"All right. Better let me see you safe home, judge. You got an ugly rap, and it may— Of course you've had the doctor?"

"No. Race sent for him, but he was dead drunk, I reckon. At any rate, he didn't turn up, and—no—"

Solemn Saul lost the rest of the sentence, for both men had turned away from the rocks, and were walking leisurely toward town.

"Waal, you be two purty ducks!" muttered the Sad Man, rising in part from his covert, to gaze after those receding figures. "An' the jedge is jest twice the purtiest! To think! Me savin' him from gittin' his cabeza bored through the center, jest fer to— Waal, folks do say that them as listens to others talkin' 'bout hev'in' a open invite, is toler'ble apt to ketch more scratches then kisses, an' I begin to reckon folks is mighty nigh right, fer once!"

Feeling fairly safe from discovery at that distance, even should either the judge or the marshal cast a glance backward, Solemn Saul swept his gaze slowly, searchingly around, looking for the man who had been the prime cause of his hearing such uncomfortable remarks concerning himself.

But his search was in vain. Not a living object was to be seen, now that Chadwick and Arnold were lost to view.

"Waal, I reckon the fool critter washed himself clean to nothin', an' I kin make more by goin' back to— The devil!" starting back and grasping a pistol-butt as a human head showed itself over a rock.

"I say, gentle stranger, I can give you a better berth than Satan!"

CHAPTER XV.

A TOUGH NUT TO CRACK.

THERE was no mistaking that voice, and as though bent on making hay while the moon shone, Bouncer Bragg gave the astonished fakir little time in which to chip in question or reproach.

"By which I mean that I can give your friend, the devil, odds and a beating, when it comes to furnishing much for little. Let me at least offer you a chance for earthly bliss, and bear in mind that I'm not asking the pitiful dollar for my own pocket: just to pay for the printing and engraving: and your buzzard will be returned to you the minute you turn this card in at headquarters."

"Sufferin' grief an' weepin' misery!" groaned the Sad Man, both hands lifting to steady his head on his shoulders, his legs weakening and his body drooping back against a convenient rock. Ef ever I did feel tired, it's jest about now!"

"Simply another reason why you should jump at the chance I'm offering you, dear friend," earnestly asserted Bouncer Bragg, throwing one leg over the rock behind which he had been crouching just prior to playing jack-in-the-box for the Sad Man's benefit. "Why do you grow weary? Because the atmosphere is so dense that it takes a tremendous effort to strain it through your lungs. What's the proper remedy? Go where the air is lighter, with a touch of ether in its oxygen, which gives one all the delights of a free drunk, without any of the big head and afterclap the next morning! Go to Blissful Buttes, in other words! Go there, and for the first time since you first beheld the light of day, experience what it is to be perfectly happy. Go—but don't forget to report that B. Bragg, Esquire, sent you thither!"

"Wuss an' wuss an' still a-comin'!" groaned Solemn Saul, cowering before that avalanche of words, then making a desperate effort to brace up, with a feeble flourish of his metal-bound staff. "Good-night, gas-bag! I'm gwine to bunk in!"

"Good idea, my dear fellow!" briskly agreed the Boomer, sliding over the rock and coming nearer. "I'll go along to help keep your eyes open, until you gain your virtuous couch. Often taken like this."

His tone was tender sympathy itself, and by the light of the moon his freshly scrubbed face seemed aglow with respectful solicitude. Of course Saul Sunday ought to have felt grateful for all this, but, on the contrary, he showed irritation, even going so far as to give his formidable staff a significant flourish as he shifted his station to the further side of the rock behind which he had played eavesdropper.

"Don't you be in sech a terrible rush, critter! As a giner'l thing, a pore victim o' sorer like my own mis'able self, cain't afford to be too mighty p'tic'lar; but when it comes to hev'in' a dug-gun spy an' key-hole 'vestigator wringin' in

his— I say, pardner, what was ye tryin' to find out, jest a bit back?"

"Waiting for you; nothing more, my dear sir," blandly chuckled the representative from Blissful Buttes. "And you, Solomon Dumps?"

"Bein' waited fer, I reckon, unless you're a liar. Didn't hear nothin' as tickled ye too mighty funny, did ye?"

"About the fakir who went around seeking suckers, that he might grow powerful and wax fat through squeezing their weasels, for instance, dear boy?" lightly purred Mr. Bragg. "Seems to me I *did* hear something which rather favored that hilarious supposition, but—"

"Good Lawd!" groaned Sunday, seemingly on the verge of swooning. "What've I done that sech a calamity should pour all over me like a— I say, critter?" bracing up sharply, with a visible effort.

"You have my gracious permission, Solomon Unwise; say it!"

"I cain't even putend to match ye at playin' the dug-gun fool, fer whar I hed to larn by hard study, you was borned that way! So—flag o' truce! I'll face my keards ef you'll board your hand. So—jest fer why was you playin' spy on them two pesky critters, a bit ago?"

"Watching my chance to sell 'em a prospectus of Blissful Buttes, of course," with charming promptitude. "Was just on the point of flipping 'em a card, to come at 'em by degrees, when the judge took his feet in his hand and struck for Sleepy-land."

"How in natur' did ye git hyar ahead o' me, then?" asked Sunday, trying a fresh tack. "Thar I was, a-talkin' 'way to ye like a neighbor woman with clothes a-dryin' on the 'vision line, an' when I looked at ye to see ef you'd scrubbed the bull clapper out o' ye, thar ye wasn't, nur noways nigh it!"

"Well, if you'll promise not to grow huffy, dear fellow, I'll explain the why and wherefore. You hit the stream a few yards above where I did, you remember?"

"I reckon I did, but what's that got to do with your slopin' so powerful sly?"

"Water runs down stream, quite naturally; at least, yonder river does. And you were scrubbing yourself. And—well, I just *had* to skin out or turn my toes up, Solomon! I hated to leave you so unceremoniously, but self-preservation is the first law of nature, and—why don't you wander far away into the wilderness where you can make the attempt without endangering other lives than your own, dear fellow, and take a bath with briefer intervals—say twenty years or so apart?"

"That *does* settle it!" croaked the Sad Man, casting a reproachful glance into that bland visage. "Time an' time over I've doubted ef I wasn't jest a weenty bit cracked, but now I knows it! Ef I wasn't a fool, I'd never 'a' wasted time an' trouble savin' sech a critter as you be from gittin' chawed all up when— I'm *guine* home!"

"So you hinted once before, pardner, and I repeat, what I said then, that I'll take care you don't drop to sleep along the way. The moon is pretty nigh its full, and a fellow with none too strong wits hadn't ought to be left entirely without a guardian spirit. So— Eh?"

In real or admirably counterfeited disgust, Sunday had turned his face toward, fairly clearing that little patch of rocks before Bouncer Bragg could overtake him; but now, at touch of the hand that attempted to slip inside his arm, the shell fakir jerked away, once more facing the advocate of Blissful Buttes.

"Stiddy, you, critter!" frowningly exclaimed Solemn Saul, bringing his staff as a barrier between them. "I hain't fergot so soon what I ketched with the two listenin' ears o' me, back thar 'mongst the rocks! Mebbe you don't guess it, but I overheard all the judge hed to say to the city marshal, an'—"

"Well, well, poor devil!" sighed the Boomer, heroically standing his ground. "I wouldn't take it so to heart, if I stood in your shoes. I'm willing to accept all that with a pinch of salt, and as it's night, I really don't mind it so much."

"Waal, I be dug-gun!" slowly ejaculated the Sad Man, staring with drooping jaw at his odd companion. "What on airth be ye tryin' to git through ye, anyway, critter?"

"Of course, I'm running a certain degree of risk, but the town appears to be quieting down, and yonder clouds promise to hide the fair face of Dame Luna at spells. Still, if we should happen to steer too close to any reputable-looking citizen, you mustn't get huffy if I dodge 'em until the danger is past."

"Mebbe you know what—"

"Because I'm in duty bound to uphold the credit of Blissful Buttes, and I really couldn't consent to play Old Dog Tray for your—"

"I say—hold on!" exploded Solemn Saul, with a swing and a sweep of his staff that caused the Boomer to involuntarily jump back a pace or two. "I ketch what you're talkin', but billy-be-jo-hammered ef I kin even begin fer to make out what you're sayin'! Who's a dog, an' what've I done that ye want to sling a tray at me—or any other keerd?"

"Now don't jump clean off the handle, my dear sir," soothingly muttered Bragg, with an

apprehensive glance around them. "Don't bowl out after such an unearthly fashion, or you'll bring the entire town this way, to see what circus has broken loose! Then—I'd just *have* to run away, and you might besilly enough to think 'twas through fear of *your* rage, and, elated by such an unusual circumstance ten to one you'd tell everybody who your companion really was!"

"Mebbe you reckon I couldn't do jest that, too!" and the fakir gave a short, dry laugh, his manner changing abruptly. "For instance: suppose I illustrate by tellin' ye I hardly ever run across a critter who knew how to put on an' w'ar a false baird an' wig as well as you do!"

"Is that so?" in mock amazement. "Well, my Solomon o' the Keen Peepers, it isn't exactly polite to tell another gentleman he lies, but—are you quite free to cast stones?"

There came a brief pause, during which the two men stood gazing steadily into each other's eyes. Then Solemn Saul opened his woolen shirt, and pushed one side far enough to give a glimpse of a metal badge, pinned to his under-vest.

Bouncer Bragg cast a glance at the engraved emblem, then languidly yawned, gently flinging out a hand as he spoke:

"I know where I can buy 'em at less than a dollar a dozen, my dear fellow! Do you mean to insinuate that you are a detective?"

"That's jest what I be, pardner, an' ef you—"

"Easy, my noble thief-taker!" with just the hint of danger in his smooth tones. "Do you mean to hint that you are looking *for me*?"

"Waal, not to say jest yit," hesitated Sunday. "I know you're playin' some sort o' game, white or black, but I've looked ye over close 'nough to feel pritty sure you're not *my* game."

"All right, and the war-cloud passes on! Now—let me sell you a ticket of admission to Blissful Buttes, only the sum of one little dollar, cash on the nail, and as a chromo, I'll guarantee you leave to pick and choose among all the game you find in that latitude! Just think of it, man! Only one poor, lean, hungry buzzard dollar! And squandering that, admits you to an earthly paradise, where every Adam is guaranteed an Eve, and an extra one for each lot he purchases! If you don't want 'em for home use, what's the matter with farming 'em out, as the wise Mormons do? What's the matter with—"

"Oh, let up on that guff!" impatiently interrupted the self-admitted detective, one hand dropping on a shoulder of the glib-tongued Boomer, his own face coming closer for a better scrutiny. "'Twas all right while you knew I was playing a part, but *now*—let's get down to sober business!"

"I'm talking business, my dear sir, and unless you take to your heels and run like a scared turkey, I'm going to sell you at least one share in Blissful Buttes before—"

"All right; here's your dollar," with a dry laugh, as he fished up the coin and dropped it into that ready palm. "Never mind the card; I reckon I can trust you for that amount."

"That isn't business, my kind patron," coolly objected Bragg, exchanging a printed card for the coin. "Just follow directions, and don't forget to tell 'em that I sent you! Because, my dear fellow, that's how I get the pay for the wear and tear of tongue and conscience!"

"That's all right, though why you *will* persist in trying to play a worn out farce before a friend, passes me! Now—to business! I saw how Hugh Chadwick started and stared when you entered the Bon Ton, to-night. I saw how closely he kept watch all the time he was pretending to be knocked silly by Hungry Mike. I heard what he said about you to Dave Arnold, back at yonder rocks. Now—what caused it all? What reason has he for being afraid of you?"

"You really wish to know all that?"

"Would I take the trouble to ask, if I didn't?"

"Well, there is something in that! All right, gentle patron! I'll make it a point to look the judge up, to-morrow, and ask him for the information, in your name. And—that reminds me—what is your name, by the way?"

Solemn Saul drew back a bit, plainly disappointed, and this showed even more plainly in his altered tones as he slowly spoke:

"My name, is it? Well, you can call me pardner, or adversary, just as your best judgment tells you it's for the best."

"All right!" with a careless nod and half-suppressed yawn. "So very kind in you to leave me a choice! I'd express my heartfelt thanks for the favor, but I'm entirely too sleepy. So—when I was a kid, my wise grandma never tired of bidding me resist temptation and fight the adversary! So—good-night, Mr. Adversary!"

"You really mean it that way, then?" sternly asked Sunday.

"Can't I coax you to invest another dollar in Blissful Buttes, Mr. Adversary? You'll never have another such a chance while—"

"That's all right! Sleep hearty, Bouncer Bragg—while you can!"

And Solemn Saul strode rapidly away toward his hotel.

CHAPTER XVI.

SOLEMN SAUL MAKES A DUTY CALL.

THAT hotel proved to be the "Pluribus," run by the patriotic New-Englander, Darius Godkin,

and the first thing the Sad Man did after entering the office, was to inspect the dingy dogs-eared and fly-specked register lying at one end of the desk where Darius Godkin presided in person during business hours.

"Slings a pretty slick quill, I guess!" nodded the Yankee, with a passing glance at the bold business-hand in which Nathan Knight had registered his own name, followed by that of Miss Norine Lawrence. "Ef he wasn't purty stiddy used to writin', I guess them letters'd look a leetle more wobbly, like, considerin' he'd jest come in afoot, from bein' held up—"

"You don't tell me!" ejaculated Sunday, really interested. "Was that why the stage was late?"

"Reckon you must 'a' bin purty considerable busy, mister, not to hev knowed what was goin' on? Didn't hear no racket, nor nothin'? Why, man alive! I guess mighty nigh the hull town was so eternally stirred up over— An' you *really* didn't know it?"

By dint of crisp, leading questions, Sunday extracted such information as he needed to eke out what Hugh Chadwick had let fall in his hearing, over by the rocks, and making a mental note of the room-numbers placed against those two names, he turned away with a yawn, the key to his own chamber in hand, a stick with lighted candle in the other, the metal-bound staff thrust under an arm.

The gossip-loving landlord followed as far as the door which opened into the passage where the narrow flight of stairs began, but as Solemn Saul paused not, seemingly unbearing his shrill chatter, he drew back with a sigh of regret, to wait the hour for closing the house.

Sunday held up his light as he passed quietly along the corridor on the second floor, reading each rudely painted number as he passed between the double row of small chambers. He took particular note of the two rooms to which Nathan Knight and his niece had been assigned, but passed on to his own chamber with a barely perceptible pause.

Unlocking the door, he entered, closing and turning the key after him, then dropping a handkerchief over the knob in such a fashion as to effectually mask the key-hole, in case any one should see fit to play the spy over his movements.

"It's a long chance, but that infernally cool rascal wouldn't be above doing even so much, I reckon!" muttered the detective, as he put the candle on the painted stand, then sunk down on the edge of the narrow, hard bed against the wall. "Who is he? What is he? Did I play the fool in letting him know I was something more than a stray fakir?"

For some little time Saul Sunday sat motionless, buried in thought. He reviewed the curious chain of events in which he had played an unpremeditated part, that evening, now smiling as he made mental note of a possible bit, then frowning as he fancied he saw where he had taken an unwise or dubious step.

But on one point he found slight difficulty in reaching a definite conclusion.

"I didn't tell Bouncer Bragg much more than he already suspected, at all events! And, with a fellow as keen and cool as he showed himself this night, I'd rather deal openly than try to hide behind a flimsy mask! If he won't help, he'll hardly hinder, after the hint I let drop as to the judge!"

Like one feeling a bit better satisfied with himself after reaching this conclusion, Saul Sunday drew a stout grip-sack from under the bed, unlocking it and spreading part of its contents on the bed. Then he removed a portion of his garb as a fakir, replacing it with a well-worn suit of "hand-me-downs," then fixing a wig and a full beard of sandy-gray hair on his head and face. This was not a difficult matter, since his own hair was cropped short, and his face clean-shorn save for that long, slender tuft on the tip of his pointed chin; a true "billy-goat."

This disguise perfected before a hand-glass which his grip supplied, Saul Sunday noiselessly unlocked his door, blowing out his light before cautiously widening that crack, only crossing the threshold when he felt assured no prying eyes were on the alert in that vicinity.

A smoky lamp burned dimly from a bracket near the head of the stairs, and that gave light sufficient for the disguised detective to single out the chamber assigned to Nathan Knight.

He stooped to listen at the key-hole for a brief space. There was no light within, and though he failed to catch the sound of breathing, he had little doubt but that the gentleman he wished to see, was there.

"Awake, too, or he'd breathe louder," was his mental comment, as he closed a hand to rap gently on the door.

"Who's there?" came a low, half-startled challenge.

"One you expect, Mr. Knight," guardedly spoke the detective. "Dave Cook, Number Sixty!"

There was an ejaculation as of surprise, followed by the hasty shuffling of bare feet on the uncarpeted floor within. A dim light came through the key-hole, and after a brief delay, the door was opened, to be pushed wide enough for Solemn Saul to slip inside.

"I don't—you might wait—"

"That's all right, sir," muttered Sunday, closing and locking the door behind himself. "I'm the man General Dave Cook promised to furnish, as I'll take pleasure in proving to you. If this note from him isn't enough, then I'll see what else I can supply."

Nathan Knight, only half dressed, fell back to the bedside, candle in hand, gazing curiously, doubtfully, at that bent, commonplace figure, so utterly unlike the popular idea of a detective. Still, he accepted the sealed envelope which Sunday proffered, and tearing it open, took in the contents at a glance.

"You are the person named in this, of course?" he asked, looking up from the paper, with that doubt still lingering in his disappointed eyes.

"Thomas Mohrbacher, at your service, sir," bowed the detective. "I believe I gave you the signal agreed upon?"

"Yes; both are correct, but—"

"You looked for a leaf from a sensational novel, instead of a line from nature, no doubt," with a low, pleasant chuckle. "Still, you know, it takes all sorts of men to make up a world, and mayhap I'll pan out richer than the first prospect indicates. General Cook don't often make a mistake, and he picked me out as the man who could best serve your ends, this trip."

"How long have you been in Gopher Slope?"

"Several days."

"What have you to report?"

"Just general progress, at present. If I am wrong, please correct me. I was to come here, and find out what I could concerning the mine known as Neverfail, its value, its owners, past and present. I was to watch for your arrival, and lose as little time as possible in introducing myself to you."

"Right," with a nod of approval, a gleam in his keen eyes showing that his opinion of the detective was changing for the better. "You have been busy, of course; what have you discovered?"

"Well, so far as I have investigated, the mine is a really valuable property. Just now it is idle, but only because its present owner, Hugh Chadwick, wishes to sell out. When the hands were laid off, less than a week ago, the ore was rich as ever, and showed signs of growing even better, rather than worse."

"Then Hugh Chadwick is the sole owner of the mine?"

"So it appears. He was one of the original discoverers; one Ethelbert Lawrence was the other, and they worked the claim in partnership until the property proved to be far richer than their most sanguine hopes."

"From all I can learn, guardedly as I felt bound to work, the partners didn't fay as well as they might. Not that there was any actual row, so far as I can hear, but their temperament was so different that a split was bound to come, sooner or later. So a bargain was struck and Chadwick bought Lawrence out."

"Where such a valuable property was at stake, of course the papers would be placed on record, in due form. Never mind that, then, for the present. What became of Lawrence? Is he still in town?"

"No, sir. He left the Slope, shortly after selling out to Chadwick."

"You are positive he left? There was no—no trouble?" hesitated Knight, his lids drooping to veil his inward emotions as he waited for the answer to his unsteady query.

"There was no quarrel between him and Chadwick, if that is what you allude to, sir. I claimed to have known Lawrence, years ago, as the best cover to my questions, and if there had been any such affair, I'm pretty sure I would have heard of it."

"I found his name on the register, downstairs, and the landlord, when I called his notice to it, said that he remembered the date: that Lawrence registered the night before he took the east-bound stage, saying that he was homeward bound, at last."

Nathan Knight was taken with a convenient fit of husky coughing, just then, which enabled him to smother the words that struggled for utterance. Ethelbert Lawrence never reached home, if he did start.

Saul Sunday sat quietly waiting for the next question. If he saw through that pretense, he made no sign.

"Then you consider I would be justified in striking a bargain with Hugh Chadwick for his mining property, including the Neverfail?"

"Much depends on the price asked, of course," came the deliberate response. "With that, however, I have nothing to do. Still, from what I have gleaned concerning the judge, as a business man, I'd advise you to make haste slowly, and take nothing for granted."

"You consider him tricky, then?" asked Nathan Knight, struck by the coincidence: for Fred Galloway had given him pretty much the same warning.

"Well, even those who like him best and admire him the most, freely admit that the judge is a hard man to trade with; but that isn't my whole reason for venturing to advise you to feel each step before you take it. I've struck several

fresh points, this evening, which I firmly believe will pay for the time and trouble of following them out. You are a man of business, yourself, and can easily find pretexts for protracting negotiations. Will you do this, sir?"

"If you seriously think I had better—yes."

"I do think so, though I can't explain in full, just at present. But one thing I will say: if you should chance to encounter a glib-tongued fellow who calls himself Bouncer Bragg, give him a close inspection. It may pay for your trouble!"

"What am I to understand by that, sir?"

"To tell the blunt truth, Mr. Knight, I hardly know," admitted the detective, with a faint smile at his own words. "But this I do know: *Hugh Chadwick is afraid of him*. The fellow wears a wig and false beard, back of which lies a face which the judge thinks he ought to recognize."

"Surely, you can't think—could it be Lawrence?"

"I never knew him, so can't even guess, but the same suspicion struck me, and for that reason I asked you to note his face when you met. If necessary, I will bring about that meeting."

With that, the detective rose from his seat—the one chair with which the little chamber was supplied, Nathan Knight sitting on the edge of his bed—as though he deemed his business finished for the present, but his employer quickly spoke up:

"You are not going, so soon?"

"I think I have told you about all I've been able to pick up, so far. It is growing late, and you will be likely to receive a call from the judge in the morning, if it is the Sabbath. So—good-night!"

"Wait: how am I to find you, in case I wish to communicate something? Are you stopping at this house?"

"I have a room here, yes; but you may find some difficulty in recognizing me, in the daytime, poor detective though you thought me, at sight. So—if I am wanted, just mark a double cross, in pencil, on the upper left-hand corner of your door, outside. I'll see that you are not kept long in waiting."

Once more bidding the gentleman good-night and pleasant dreams, Saul Sunday let himself out of the chamber, passing in the gloom to his own room, where, masking the key-hole as before, he quickly removed his disguise, locking all up in his grip, then lying down on the bed, to almost immediately fall into a peaceful sleep.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SONG OF BLISSFUL BUTTES.

THE next sunrise heralded a perfect day, with just breeze enough stirring to temper those bright rays, and the prospect was by no means overcast by the fact of its being "Sunday in camp."

Gopher Slope was a little later in bestirring herself, perhaps, but then there was a moral certainty that this would be fully evened up by a later retiring, to say nothing of the regular seventh-day extras which would be crowded in between spools.

Bouncer Bragg, without regard to the hour at which he may or may not have found his couch on that eventful Saturday night, was afoot bright and early, almost as soon as the sun, and fully as smiling.

Like one better versed in the ethics of the effete East, the Blissful Buttes representative had laid aside his ordinary costume, and now appeared in a shiny suit of black, its cut almost as clerical as its color, with a primly-knotted white tie encircling his standing collar.

"Well, friend," slowly uttered the "day watch" whom Bouncer Bragg found on duty at the Bon Ton Saloon, critically viewing the apostle from crown to sole, then reversing the order. "You're doing it regardless, ain't ye? Now, if you had cotton gloves, and a stovepipe with a weeper wrapped around it, I do reckon the sports would mark this day with a pot of red paint; less than that wouldn't begin to do it full justice."

"I'm not— Do you really think I'd better?" hesitated Bragg.

It was a powerful temptation, but the bar-keeper had been cautioned by Horace Bolster to treat this gentleman with all due respect, should he chance to put in an appearance before he, Bolster, showed up for the day. And so, resigning all thoughts of a time-honored joke, quite a different response was given, with a sincerity which could not be doubted for a moment:

"I'm afraid your constitution couldn't stand it, sir, though the sports would make it mighty interesting for you while it lasted. You see, in this part of the country, Sunday is a day off, and pretty near everybody goes in for a jolly good time."

"So I understood, and for that reason I brought my plink-plunk along, just to hold the crowd while I poured Gospel truth into their ears—see?"

Danny Virtue had paid due attention to the words of his employer, and a glimpse of the banjo which Bouncer Bragg had placed on the bar, gave him a pretty accurate idea of what was to be the programme. He fell in with it promptly enough, foreseeing a combination of

amusement and business; and, thanks to his shrewdness, matters were quickly put in train.

"You look too much like a Gospel-sharp, this way," he said, apologetically, as he twisted that lawn tie awry, giving the stuffily starched collar a rakish cant, then rebuttoning the black coat unevenly. "That's more like it, and when the sports see a reflection of their own feelings, be sure they'll chip in their ducats all the livelier!"

Danny rolled an empty whisky barrel out in front of the saloon, then drew his revolvers, and pointing their muzzles upward, emptied both cylinders as rapidly as his trained fingers could juggle the triggers.

"That's the bugle-call, pardner," he laughed, cheerfully. "The boys will be on deck as soon as they can jump into their rags, and, to make it a little more binding, I reckon you'd better climb the bar'l, and yank a tune out o' that fryin'-pan."

Danny Virtue proved himself a true prophet, so far as the speedy nucleus of a crowd was concerned, and after that the rest remained with the banjo and its manipulator.

Although in milder flavor and smaller degree than of the good old days, "Sunday in camp" was still regarded as a day of recreation rather than of rest; and though Gopher Slope was, as a rule, a perfect model of decorum on such occasions, the citizens of the masculine persuasion were prompt to grasp at any show for amusement.

And hence it came about that, long before half of Gopher Slope had their breakfast-fires started, Bouncer Bragg was "holding forth" to a large and appreciative audience in front of the Bon Ton Saloon.

If not exactly a virtuoso, he knew how to make a banjo "talk," and fitting his songs to the occasion, it needed not the reassuring nod of Danny Virtue's head to assure him he had most effectually "caught on."

But Bouncer Bragg was not undergoing all this trouble simply for his health, as he now took occasion to inform his congregation.

"I sincerely wish I might, gentlemen, but my contract forbids, and while my heart is more than willing, my pocket can't afford it! Not to put too fine a point upon it, my genial auditors, I've just been throwing out a sprat to catch a whale!"

"And yet that hardly does common justice to the glorious truth which brings me before you, gentlemen, or to mine own honor. If I do ask you to part with a miserable dollar, am I not offering you hundreds, if not thousands, in return? And that isn't saying a single word about the extras, either!"

"Why, gentlemen, to tell you the simple truth—and I never learned how to lie—although I've made this matter a careful study for longer than I care to confess, I'm free to own up that I can't begin to see how so much can be given in exchange for so little!"

"Wind, is it?" slipped in one of the assembly innocently.

"You'd ought to know, since you make the offering, my gentle sir," bowed Bouncer Bragg, but without pausing for the laugh to follow. "I've sung some of my best songs for your delectation, gentlemen, but even my tongue is too thick and clumsy to do half-way justice to the sweet song of Blissful Buttes! Even I, whose eyes have seen, whose ears have heard, whose senses have feasted on all that glorious combination of earthly delights and heavenly enjoyments—even I can't reach the lowest note of that marvelous song with a fifty-foot pole!"

"Then I don't reckon it's any use o' we-uns' makin' a try!"

"Oh, shoot the Buttes! It's the banjoseph we want to be hit with!"

"Gently, noble seniors! You can't see the monkey without paying for the privilege, and the one-time filly needs golden or silvery grease to set her sluggish heels in active motion. Just so the servant is worthy his hire, and you mustn't run away with the notion that I am making a side-show of my noble self, purely for love!"

"To get right down to business, gentlemen, and to return to the banjo as speedily as possible, suppose you help me out by taking the trouble to glance over these cards," a flirt of his hand scattering a liberal supply throughout that congregation. "While I'm open to answer any and all reasonable questions, time is valuable, and I have met a few people who prefer to believe their own eyes rather than their own ears. So—read, digest, and, above all, hearken!"

"A grander, purer, holier, more generous scheme than this was never devised by mortal man! If this wasn't the holy Sabbath—"

"Thar hain't no Sunday in camp, critter!" called out a coarse voice.

"Is that so? Well, then I'll cut myself loose, and make hay while the sun shines: in other words, to solid business!"

"Gentlemen, all, I'm here to boom the Blissful Buttes, but I'm under heavy bonds, legal, moral and mineral, to tell nothing more than the unclothed truth: I'd say *naked*, if it wasn't Sunday!"

"Who's takin' of my name in wain?" croak-

ed a melancholy voice, and a slight stir in the crowd, now of goodly dimensions brought under Bouncer Bragg's eyes the man with the metal-bound staff.

"Go on with your whittling, Mr. Adversary!" giving a half-defiant nod in that direction. "I'm talking to your betters, and unless you've come to pay for a ticket of admission to—"

"Mournful Jemima—no!" exploded the Sad Man, shrinking back.

"Another snag extracted, and still the current of glorious truth flows onward! Just think of it, gentlemen! You pay me a miserable dollar. I give you a signed ticket, which is both that and a receipt, combined. You go to Blissful Buttes. You show this ticket. You are greeted as a prospective brother, or son, or daughter, as the sex and age may justify. You are taken in and—not done for, after the ordinary acceptance of that much abused term—find yourself in an earthly paradise! Why, just think of it!

"I don't invite you to migrate to an ordinary, every-day town. We have five distinct buttes; all under one Government, to be sure, but with a head and staff for each of the minor four buttes. And you are given your choice of the five, with ample time and opportunity for investigation before deciding in which you'd rather locate.

"For instance, if you are a thoroughbred sport; if you love an occasional jamboree, with a music-hall on one side, a select assortment of lay-outs on the other, a sparring booth opposite, and quiet rooms for a bout at short-cards overhead, you want to strike West Butte.

"And just so any man of any particular bent or passion can be exactly suited at one or the other of the five buttes. And all it costs for explicit directions thither, including a ticket of admission, good for thirty days after it is presented, is simply one dollar! Just one miserable dollar, gentlemen! And after this lecture is over, I'll stand ready to sacrifice my tickets at that low price, though more than one tear of shame at the wretched pittance will surely go with them!

"Now, gentlemen, I'm here to give you all possible information concerning the Buttes, save and except its precise location. That I hold in reserve for those who have sufficient faith, to invest a dollar, for reasons which any business man can readily appreciate. Who'll be the first seeker after perfect knowledge?"

"Waal, I don't know," drawled one of the crowd. "What's the show of a man wanted to 'vest his capitol into the egg-business?"

"Couldn't be better, kind sir," unheeding the burst of laughter which followed that allusion to an event still rank, if past. "South Butte is the location for you. Quick sales guaranteed for all the hen-fruit you can raise, and lacking the feathered fowl, you can buy a stock of egg-plants for almost nothing. Eggs grow on trees, at South Butte, and if a man don't pick them before they get over-ripe, he has his choice between getting shot or eating his own stock in trade!"

Solemn Saul, who had suffered himself to be pushed back until he now stood almost at the extreme edge of the crowd, gave a hollow groan at this glib assertion, and felt obliged to cease whittling at the odd instrument his keen blade was shaping, to lean on his staff for support.

"S'pose a 'ciple o' pro'bish'n gits run out o' the Slope, what show'd he hev over yen' way, boss?" hiccupped a greasy, ragged, bloated bummer, putting on a look of owlish gravity for the occasion.

"We'd send him to West Butte to graduate," came the prompt response. "He would be quartered in a saloon, sleep in a whisky barrel, fed on Old Rye and more ancient Bourbon, with side-dishes cooked in rum, brandy, gin, with cock-tails and mixed drinks to fill up odd spaces. He would receive this treatment until he was thoroughly reformed of the drinking habit, then turned—"

"Gi' me a ticket! Gi' me two of 'em, boss!" spluttered the bummer, so far carried away by that brisk description, that his feet tripped him up, and he fell headlong, to be used as a stepping-stone by the amused crowd.

Solemn Saul, rallying, had vanished from sight, and Bouncer Bragg seemed to feel that he had it all his own way, when still another of his amused auditors chipped in with a mock serious query:

"Any show for a boss-thief, boss?"

"West Butte again, gentle sir! We grow hemp there, and have three flourishing rope-walks in full blast. In fact, and in all seriousness, gentlemen, it would be a far brieter task to tell you what Blissful Buttes cannot offer to the right sort of settlers! And, though I'm paid to sing her glories, natural and acquired, inside of a short year, all the world will know her, and all their relatives will flock to her feet, begging in vain for what I now offer you at a merely nominal price!

"Why so, do I hear you ask? Why not, I echo! Blissful Buttes is the exact center of the universe, and the long-sought-for North Pole serves as her pivot! We have a climate that knocks California galley-west, and can give the land of the Dagos long odds and a beating! We

have free schools, free courts, free whisky—to those who know how to get into the inner circle, that is!

"I risk nothing in prophesying that the Capitol of the United States will be removed from Washington to Blissful Buttes inside of the next ten years, and then if you don't have the laws just as you wish them, blame yourselves for not becoming one of the oldest inhabitants when the chance—Pitiful father! what's that?"

Well might he ask, for a truly hideous howl was rending the air!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SERMON OF THE SHELLS.

THE Sad Man from San Saba was at the bottom of that disturbance, and his principal aid was the seemingly innocent bit of wood which he had been shaping with his knife while forming a unit in Bouncer Bragg's audience.

Meekly beating a retreat when his stomach could no longer resist that flood of eloquence, Solemn Saul had taken note of an envious saloon-keeper, whose establishment stood on the same street, but something like a hundred yards above the Bon Ton.

"Reckon they're jest more'n rakin' in the scads, down yender," he ventured. "Runnin' a fake, too! Pity the trade wasn't 'vided up, eh?"

"Maybe you can show me a way to do it?" growled the man of whisky.

"Mebbe I kin, ef you're willin' to back me up. Got a bit o' strong string, handy?"

The cord was produced, and Solemn Saul tied it to the bit of thin board which he had shaped to his liking, through a hole drilled near one of the tapering ends. The other end of the string was fastened to his polished staff, then, standing clear of all obstacles, Sunday lifted his staff, whirling his "howler" around his head, slowly at first, but gaining in rapidity as the wild, weird sound rose to a demoniacal screech. Then, faster or slower, as his grim fancy dictated, Solemn Saul played a hideous tune on his diabolical instrument of torture, drawing fully half that crowd away from astounded Bouncer Bragg, inside of the first minute.

"Most any blame fool kin plink-plunk onto a bandjo, ef he kin beg, steal or borrow the instrument," Solemn Saul croakingly explained, all the time showing off the truly marvelous capabilities of his cigar-shaped invention. "But it takes genius fer to make yer own brass band, an' all out o' jest a bit o' shingle an' a nite o' cotton cord!"

In vain Bouncer Bragg strummed on his banjo. In vain that he roared forth his jolliest songs. And equally in vain was it that he began a moral lecture against the evils of gambling, particularly on the holy Sabbath, and especially another man's skin game. The tide had turned, and the thimble-rigger was just in the humor for improving his advantage, so curiously won.

"An' the ole cat dies!" he said, letting his "howler" slacken its pace, the hideous yell melting away into a subdued moan. "An' the 'ventor of this truly remarkable sweet singer out o' Israel, begs this great an' ge-lorious audience fer to see how much they kin git back from riskin' next to nothin'."

With a deft twist of his wrist he planted and opened his staff at one and the same time, spreading the little square of black velvet and stringing upon it three shells and the little joker.

"Three to one you don't take up as much as you put down!" laughed one of the gathering, but betraying the true gambling fever by the natural manner in which a hand slipped into his pocket. "All right, sport! I'll go you a dollar, just to set the thing moving!"

"Stiddy, rash youth!" croaked the Sad Man, covering the "layout" with his battered felt hat. "Tetch not, lest ye git tetched, right whar you'd feel it the wu'st when ye come to pay yer board-bill! Wenter not over the barb-wire fence o' temptation, onless you've got more patches then you've got places to putt 'em on! Fer them as bets ag'in'st 'nother man's game, is tumblin' heels-over-cabeza down the steep trail which leads to ee-tarnal ruin an' never-dyin' miseryation!"

"Augh, come off! What's the use opening a game if you don't want it bucked?"

"What's the use in stickin' up light-houses 'long a rock-bound coast? Whar's the good in markin' sunken rocks with buoys, an' sech like warnin's? To save feller-critters from death an' 'struction! To warn 'em from gittin' wrecked whar less lucky ones hes come to thar ruin! To—to pint a moral an' putt up a tale in frills!

"No, no, gentle pilgrims through this wale o' black grief an' never-dyin' misery! Ef I hed the gail o' some that I mought pint out ef I wasn't 'brung up too perhite in my youthful ways, mebbe I'd play like I was Join' all this jest to fill your pockets, jest to give you fifty fer one, jest to make you ee-tarnally happy 'thout cost to your pocket or hurt to my own conscience! But—thank glory fer it!—I'm not one o' that breed o' cats!

"This isn't a song o' mountains o' blissful pleasures that I'm gwine to sing ye, gents. It's a sermon o' the shells, an' a brief but truthful preachment o' how come I like this!"

"Oh, stow the sermon! Give us a whack at the little joker, or shut up shop!"

"Ef I jest 'lustrate how a smart man, in his own eyes, kin pan out clean foolish to all as looks on, will you stop to hear what I hev to offer fer splittin' the Sabbath wide open, gentle stranger?" asked the Sad Man, with a ludicrously accurate imitation of Bouncer Bragg, in tone and manner. "All right, an' byar she goes!" his hat resuming its natural position, his bony fingers manipulating the shells with marvelous dexterity.

"Nickels, dimes an' dollars!" droned Saul, falling mechanically into his familiar rut, now that he was plying his trade. "Here she goes, an' thar she goes! Up the middle an' down the center, in an' out, round about, hop, skip an' a jump to make it all the more binding! All set, an' a dollar even that you cain't on-kiver the little joker."

With his final flourish, the last shell touched, seemed to rest an edge for the fraction of a second on the little black pea, before settling down upon the velvet. And while fishing up the named coin, the gambler kept his gaze keenly fixed upon that particular shell.

"I'm robbin' ye, gentle stranger," mournfully declared the Sad Man, while waiting. "I'm tellin' ye fair that I've got to cheat the two eyes o' ye. It's part o' the trade, an'—sold ag'in!" with a hollow groan, as the shell was lifted in vain.

"You're one o' them as cain't recognize the truth when it's showed unto the eyes o' ye, gentle stranger, but I'll give ye the full wuth o' your dollar. Ticket o' 'mission to the 'Sylum fer Fools, which you'll find standin' right in the middle o' Central Butte! Fer funder information, 'ply down the street."

"That's all right, pardner," and the loser joined good-humoredly in the laugh which was raised at his expense. "I'll give you another dollar if you'll explain just how you turned that trick, though."

"Mournful Jemima!" groaned Solemn Saul, his head drooping dejectedly. "Don't I know it? Didn't I say jest that way when I was tuck in an' stripped clean to my pelt? An' didn't—gents, all!" his head lifting, his pale blue eyes beginning to glitter, his voice catching a more manly, ringing tone: "Thar you see my text, an' ef you don't all take to your heels like a gang o' skeered turkies, right thar you'll find my sermon o' the shells."

Time was when Saul Sunday was the pride an' bright light o' all the San Saba walley! Time was when he could crow an' strut and scrap a half-circle 'round a fat pullet ekil to the purest-bred gamecock that ever tuck a fly with the gaffs! Time was—but time no longer is!

"An' what brung it all about? What cut his comb, broke his bill, floured his gills, plucked his sickle, an' blunted his gaffs? Shells—jest shells an' the little joker."

"That's what you'd say, to a man, ef I was to hold 'em up an' ax ye what ye saw. Jest three half-shells, that once hed a toothsome hunk o' meat into 'em. Jest a little round lall o' black rubber, soft 'nough to stick atwixt two fingers, an' squeezable 'nough fer to flatten out so's to look like a bit o' dirt under a fingernail."

"But that's one more proof that the human eye is powerful weak, an' easy to git foolished! This weenty ball is raully the devil, an' these shells is the hottest ovens Satan ever 'vented fer bringing about the sure death an' 'tarnal ruination o' his chosen wictims."

"I know what I'm tellin' you, gentlemen—wish't I didn't!" with a dolorous groan. "But that's part o' the cuss I fetched onto the back o' me, when I tried to get rich in sech a monstrous hurry! Fer, 'mongst my losses, gentle strangers, come a turrible gift. I don't wentur to say jest whar it come from, though I hev my own ideas. All I know is that some onseen power made me git down onto the two knees o' me, an' with salty fountains jest bubbling out o' my eyes, make a vow to pick up my cross, never to lay it down ag'in ontel I'd made amends by buildin' a 'Sylum for Fools—jest sech fools as I'm ownin' myself up to be, gentlemen!"

"From that bitter black day o' grief an' sor-rer, gents, I've never bung back nur faltered! Seuce that day o' miseryation, I've kept my pore face turned straight fer the bright light o' redemption! It's bin a long an' weary way, but I'm gittin' thar by degrees, sure ef slow! An' ef I kin tetch the right spring which every human critter hes wound up in his heart, gents, mebbe I won't hev to travel much funder then Gopher Slope afore reachin' the end I've kep' so stiddy in view."

"The main idee is like this, gentle strangers—so to speak! The world is overcrowded with fool critters who don't know no better then to b'lieve they was born knowin' it all; who reckon they kin make money by bettin' on 'nother man's game; who lays long odds that they kin play unhurt with the same fire that they've seed sizzle a brother clean up to a bunch o' greasy ashes!

"Sooner or later all sech fool critters is dead sure to come on the town, or be 'pendent on thar neighbors who've got better sense. An' knowin' all this, I've tuck a vow to raise the cash fer to

build, fit up, an' kerry on a 'sylum whar all sech kin find a home ontel they're marcifully sent over the range!

"Tain't fer me to go 'round pickin' out this man, an' that man, as bein' likely subjects fer sech a retreat. Lookin' back at the turrible fool I proved my own self, times gone by, shames me out o' any sech idee. But thar's one way I kin git at the root o' the matter, an' that way I've come to Gopher Slope jest on puppose to p'int out.

"Hyar I stan' afore ye, with the devil's tools in order, an' fingers that's guaranteed to cheat the sharpest eyes man ever wore. I tell ye fair an' square that I'll cheat ye ef ye was to bet. I'll take my solemn 'davy that you hain't even the ghost of a chance to win back a dollar you putt down.

"A'ter doin' all this, ef anybody's fool 'nough fer to buck up ag'inst the little joker, then he's one o' the pore critters my 'sylum is 'tended fer, an' the quicker he gits a ticket 'titlin' him to an upper berth inside o' them four walls, the better fer him an' all them who bes to 'sociate with him!

"Now—all sot, an' the festive joker begins his walk-around! No one bet bigger'n a dollar 'cepted, but a man kin take as many whacks as his pocket'll stand, fer he kin give the extry tickets to his 'lations who hev'n't time to come to the sermon! Hyar he comes, an' thar she goes! In an' out, top an' bottom, up an'— *Glory to the ram!*"

Solemn Saul broke off abruptly, as a shrill scream came to his ears!

CHAPTER XIX.

AN INTERRUPTED STROLL.

WHEN Nathan Knight put in an appearance, rather early on that Sunday morning, Darius Godkin began congratulating himself that, perhaps, he was going to have an easier time with his latest guests than he had dared hope for, taking into consideration his bachelor fright of the past evening.

But when Mr. Knight quietly directed him to spread breakfast for two, in the dark, retired apartment back of the office, which was locally known as the parlor, his Yankee gorge showed signs of rising in rebellion. Not for long, however!

"Put the extra service in your bill, and give this to the waiter for his or her trouble," added Mr. Knight, leaving a broad coin in the palm of mine host.

Hence it came about that, while eating their morning meal fully as early as the rest of the boarders, uncle and niece were still as strangers to the Pluribus patrons, and neither of them could be sure whether or no Fred Galloway had slept under the same roof.

An objection to meeting with the little gambler had partly caused Mr. Knight to make this arrangement for taking their meals in privacy, and his desire to postpone an interview with yet another citizen of Gopher Slope, led him into saying:

"Tis a fine morning, Norine, and if you like, we'll take a bit of a stroll. Go get your bonnet and shade, and I'll meet you at the stairs."

Norine raised no objections. Her face was pale, and dark shadows lay beneath her eyes. She had slept little and suffered much, during the night just spent.

"The fresh air is just the tonic you need, dear," gently said Nathan Knight, bending to drop a kiss on her brow as Norine passed from the room. "I'll wait here, so please make haste."

Directly at the foot of the stairs a narrow door opened on the low porch which almost invariably marks an occidental inn, and by using this exit, uncle and niece managed to quit the Pluribus Hotel without attracting attention.

Possibly Nathan Knight was right in so quickly congratulating Norine on this happy escape from boorish curiosity, but it really does seem just a little odd that he should not take warning by the incident which had greeted their arrival in Gopher Slope.

Fred Galloway would most assuredly have advised against their taking such a stroll, without guide or guardian, and even Darius Godkin, had they not taken such pains to escape his curious notice, might have ventured to let fall a hint to the effect that Gopher Slope was not precisely an eastern village, Sunday though it was.

"Not that I suppose you'll quickly forgive me for denying you the truly feminine pleasure of becoming the cynosure—"

"Don't, Uncle Nat," murmured Norine, giving his arm a pinch as her gloved hands encircled it. "Don't chatter! Let me look—and think! This is where poor papa lived! This very street is one his feet must have—oh, Uncle Nathan! do say that there is still a ray of hope!"

"Have you so soon forgotten what I told you, this morning early, pet? Your father is said to have left town, safe and sound, and as all stage passengers are regularly booked, it surely ought to be an easy task to trace his course, at least until he struck a railway. So—"

"Did you take notice—the one just past," whispered Norine, giving her uncle's arm another decided squeeze to call his attention to a neatly-dressed gentleman who had stared almost

rudely in passing, even slackening his pace as though impelled to address them.

"Hush! I didn't wish to see!" muttered Knight, quickening his pace, and taking the first turning that offered itself. "Don't look back, dear. Of course I can't be dead sure, but I've more than a fancy he's the very gentleman I've left the hotel to avoid meeting!"

"You mean Hugh Chadwick?"

"Of course! Did you ever see a more perfect morning? Did you ever feel more like casting the weight of years and cares from your shoulders, to become a boy—in *your* case, a girl, of course!" breaking off with a gay, contagious chuckle.

Nathan Knight played his part well. Knowing that Norine had kept her nerves on the rack for long weeks past, he felt that she must have relief, if only for a few hours. And so, his tongue rattling on more like that of a care-free youth than a man of business, far past the meridian of life, he paid no attention to the way they were going, and hardly realized that they had already left town some little distance behind them.

It was true, as he confidentially admitted to Norine: his second reason for taking this early stroll was his wish to avoid a more than probable call on business from Hugh Chadwick. The detective supplied by General Dave Cook, of the Rocky Mountain Detective Association, had only confirmed his own belief that delay was well worth trying for.

But Nathan Knight, well versed though he might be in the mysteries of Wall street and brokerdom, gave the western "hustlers" too little credit for enterprise, as he was on the point of discovering.

The gentleman whose keen stare had attracted Norine's notice, was indeed none other than Hugh Chadwick, on his way to the Pluribus Hotel. He had more than half-believed this couple were the last night's passengers by the robbed stage, but a possible mistake had far greater terrors for the judge, after his experience at the Bon Ton Saloon, than if those curious events had not shaken his nerves; and so he passed on to make his inquiries of Darius Godkin.

As a result, just when Norine was beginning to feel and act like her former self, and her uncle had entirely forgotten that chance encounter, Hugh Chadwick, bland and smiling, came directly across their pathway.

"Beg pardon if I'm intruding, ma'am, and you, sir, but—my name is Chadwick, and I believe I have the honor of addressing Nathan Knight, Esquire, from New York?"

"My name is Knight, yes, sir," stiffly nodded the elder gentleman, but apparently without seeing that extended hand.

"Thanks, awfully! Then, of course, you are here to see about the mining property which I am—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Chadwick," with another rigid bow. "I will do myself the honor of calling at your office to-morrow. This is Sunday, and I hardly think—"

"My dear sir," laughingly interjected the judge, with a French eloquence in shrug and gesture. "There is no Sunday in a mining-camp, and where there is so much to be discussed, one surely ought to waste no more time than is strictly unavoidable."

Norine gave her uncle a pinch and a meaning glance, neither of which could he well misinterpret, particularly as she spoke, quickly:

"I beg of you not to waste valuable moments on my account, gentlemen! I have letters to write, and—no, uncle! finish your stroll with this gentleman. I can find my way back to the hotel, alone!"

Without pausing for reply or remonstrance, Norine hastened away, and without too openly betraying his desire to avoid a business talk, Nathan Knight could not well persist in his refusal.

"The lady is all right, dear sir," smoothly uttered Chadwick, locking arms with Knight. "The Gophers may be something uncouth, so far as outward graces go, but a woman is safer among them than in your highly civilized New York. And so—you come with full power to close a bargain, of course, Mr. Knight?"

"That part of my instructions which comes first, bids me make a thorough examination of both property and papers," guardedly answered the agent. "Unless everything proves perfectly satisfactory in that connection, of course I can go no further into the matter without fresh instructions from headquarters."

"Of course not, but you needn't borrow any trouble on that score. I'm an idiot for even thinking of selling out—or would be, if I weren't growing old, and beginning to feel the need of an entire change. Still, having decided to sell, in a lump, I took pains to have everything in order for a quick and thorough investigation."

Then, talking glibly, yet plainly, Hugh Chadwick ran over the list of his property, giving the recent output, naming the facts and figures which a good business man could readily comprehend, crowding much information into brief space.

Nathan Knight listened closely, just as though he had no more important object than making

a conscientious report to his employers, and when the judge paused to catch his breath for a fresh start, he spoke:

"I really believe it is a good thing, taken in a lump, so far as I am able to judge from the reports I have heard, and the showing made on paper by your broker. But—how about those ugly rumors concerning the mine, Neverfail?"

"Rumors? I don't understand you, sir!"

Hugh Chadwick flushed hotly, then turned a bit paler than usual as he met that keen, cool gaze. A faint smile greeted that bit of haughty bluster, but Nathan Knight passed it by without further notice.

"For one thing, what is this hint at a clouded title?"

"Of the Neverfail? Why, man dear! the title is clear as sunlight! Where on earth did you pick up such an utterly ridiculous idea?"

"The Neverfail was a dual discovery, I believe? Where is the man who was in partnership with you, then?"

"Ettelbert Lawrence, do you mean? I bought his full interest in the Neverfail, which was the only bit of property we held in common. I paid him his price, in cash on the nail, to the very last cent. I did this before witnesses, for I knew I had a mighty good thing in the claim, if I could hold on to it long enough. And, to make sure there'd be no bother in such a case, I had some of the best men in Gopher Slope witness the sale, and put their signatures to the papers."

"Those documents are duly recorded, and I stand ready to show you the originals whenever you ask to see them. Can I say more, sir?"

"This former partner; he is not in town, at present?"

"Nor has he been, since shortly after I bought him out. He gave the sports a good-by blow-out, and told them he was homeward-bound; that if he hadn't made his fortune, he'd rather starve on a penny at home, than wax fat on a dollar in such a god-forsaken land as this!" laughingly added the judge.

"He really returned to his home, further east, then?"

"Unless he fell out by the wayside—he surely did!"

"May I ask why you are so confident on this point?" politely insisted Knight. "Of course, my dear sir, I will explain, on my part."

"Well, I saw him take the stage, East. I heard him say that he was booked for home. And I think I can rake up at least half a dozen reputable witnesses yet in town, who saw and heard the same thing."

"Then, how do you explain this note of warning, Mr. Chadwick?" asked Knight, producing a folded slip of paper and handing it to the judge.

But before Hugh Chadwick could do more than take the paper, they were both startled by a sharp, feminine scream of fear or of pain.

CHAPTER XX.

A SCREAM AND A SHOT.

NORINE LAWRENCE had acted on impulse, leaving Nathan Knight no choice but to accept the evil he had striven to delay. Until Hugh Chadwick actually introduced himself, she had never doubted the wisdom of that avoidance, but while Nathan Knight was so politely bluffing the magnate of Gopher Slope, his niece suddenly felt a conviction that more would be lost than gained by delay.

So, too, she had refused her uncle permission to escort her back to the hotel, even before his tongue could shape the words. And to make sure of her newly-found conviction, Norine tripped lightly away, in the direction which she had no doubt would quickly bring her in sight of Gopher Slope.

Neither she nor her uncle had taken note of the various crooks and turns which had marked their aimless stroll, and Norine did not succeed in catching sight of the mining-town nearly as quickly as she expected. Still, this gave her no uneasiness, for, though having already lost sight of her uncle, she knew that a single call would quickly bring him to her side.

When she did gain a point from whence she could look out and down upon the uncouth collection of huts, shanties and a few more pretentious buildings, she no longer felt in haste to reach that refuge, and moving a little further through the scattered rocks and scrubby bushes, Norine seated herself on a low rock, lost in deep and bitter thoughts.

As ill-luck would have it the maiden had unwittingly broken the drunken slumber of a far from savory character, in her passage through that patch of rocks; and though she was entirely ignorant of the fact, Shanghai Draper was supporting himself on an elbow, staring dazedly at that well-dressed, bowed figure, only a dozen yards away.

He had been pretty well "primed" when he first struck the Bon Ton Saloon, the evening before. He had taken several heavy drinks of raw whisky, to counteract the effects of that tremendous fall. He had even secured a bottle of liquor after being "bounced" by Race Bolster, and with it to soothe his upset stomach, he had staggered away from town, to ultimately

sink into a drunken stupor there on that rocky rise.

Rather curiously, that vision, instead of shaming the brute, served to waken his uglier passions. Just why such should be the case, Draper did not take the trouble to ask himself, but as he lay staring at Norine Lawrence, she reminded him of Bouncer Bragg, who had so thoroughly defeated and humiliated him the night last passed.

"Dug-gun 'em all!" he growled, savagely, lifting himself to a sitting posture, the exertion giving him a sharp qualm and a faint whiff of the ancient eggs with which his scrubby beard had been so plentifully anointed. "What right hev sech as him—sech as *her*, got to strut an' putt on frills over the likes o' *me*? What's the use o' bein' a feller, ef ye hain't a fell o' a heller?"

Although able to navigate, after a fashion, Shanghai was still considerably more than half-seas-over, as was evident from his hardly logical conclusion, quite as much as from his dizzy lurch as he gained his feet; a lurch that brought him up against a rough rock with a force that drew a curse of pain from his cracked lips.

Norine heard that ugly sound, and sprang to her feet, startled but not frightened; she little knew what a devil a drunken ruffian of this caliber could prove, on slight provocation.

"Hol' on thar, pritty pullet!" hoarsely ejaculated Shanghai, steadying himself, each moment giving him back a portion of his usual powers of locomotion. "I'm a game-cock o' purest pedigree, an' when I crow, all the chickens in sound, goes hide-out! I'm a— *Hol' on*, I tell ye!"

If Norine had only stood her ground, showing no fear, as she surely would had her nerves been in their normal condition, much if not all of what followed might have been averted. But she saw that this ugly giant was drunk. She caught a disgusting odor, and with a low cry of alarm, she sought to flee.

Unfortunately, Shanghai Draper was partly between her and town, and forgetting for the instant that other help was not far away, the maiden tried to pass him by, forcing herself to speak with assumed dignity:

"Let me pass, sir! I am— Don't dare to touch me!"

"Stiddy, pritty pullet!" cried Draper, spreading his arms wide, and with drunken agility blocking her way. "You hain't even tuck one weenty squint to see how dandy-gay a rooster I be! You hain't knowin' what a mighty rich treat you're— Gi' me a bill, pullet! Jest le' me show ye the style I kin sling on when I want to do me proud!"

"I do not know you, sir," Norine forced herself to say, as coldly as possible, while those shivers of dread were creeping over her.

"That's a misfortune easy got over, ducky! I'm jest the easiest rooster you ever met up with, fer to— *Stiddy*, ole hen!"

"Let me pass, or you shall be punished severely, sir!"

"Good Lawd! an' hain't I bin? I'm too mighty low down an' mis'able a cuss fer the likes o' you even to look at crossways, hain't I? Waal, mebbe— I say, hol' on!"

Norine made a desperate attempt to evade those soiled hands, but one of them closed on an arm, jerking her back with brutal force, as its owner coarsely laughed:

"I'll taste o' your purty red bill fer that, or—"

Norine, struggling desperately to free herself, gave vent to a loud shriek; the same which cut Solemn Saul's sermon short, and which gave Nathan Knight such a shock, besides reaching still other ears.

"Shet yer dug-gun cacklin', or I'll—"

That threat was never finished, for the sharp report of a pistol rung out upon the air, and Shanghai Draper released the maiden, to fling up his arms and stagger blindly, falling heavily upon his face among the rocks, emitting a hoarse, fierce yell of mortal pain!

Dizzy from fright, fearing she scarcely knew what, Norine tried to seek safety in flight, but her foot tripped over a low bush, and she fell. To arise, and run blindly into the arms of Bouncer Bragg, who let fall his still smoking revolver in order to lend her support.

He said something—the poor girl was too frightened to understand, even if she heard, and she was struggling to break away, when a sharp, stern voice rung forth:

"Steady, you cur! Release the lady and— hands up, or I'll drop you, for keeps!"

Bouncer Bragg instinctively slackened his grasp, at the same time turning his head in the direction from whence came that fierce challenge. He caught sight of a neatly-garbed, stylish-looking man of middle size, who had him covered with a brace of business-like pistols.

Norine broke away with a sobbing cry of mingled joy and fright, springing unsteadily toward the latest comer as though she recognized a trusted friend, panting:

"Oh, Mr. Galloway! Save me from— Take me home, for— I'm—"

"Norine! Darling! I'm coming!"

Active as Hugh Chadwick was, Nathan Knight out-tripped him in that brief race, once he divined that peril was menacing his sister's child.

Of them all, only the little sport remained cool and composed, holding the man from Blissful Buttes lined, ready to send a bullet through brain and heart at his first hostile movement. Only his coldly blazing eyes and unusual pallor betrayed his fierce rage, but those signals of danger were sufficient for Bouncer Bragg.

Up flew his empty hands the instant Norine broke away, but he called out, half-angrily:

"Don't play the idiot and waste your lead on the wrong man, sir! I simply shot this dirty cur, to save the lady from—"

"What's all this racket about?" blustered Hugh Chadwick, leaving Nathan Knight to catch and soothe Norine as best he might. "Who has dared— *Ha!*" as he recognized the Boomer. "Shoot him down, Galloway, if he tries to escape!"

"If he does, I'll make him prove it, judge!" with a short, forced laugh. "Vent your rage on the real offender, please. "You know him, I dare say, judging from last night, at the Bon Ton."

Hugh Chadwick gave a start as he caught sight of that prostrate figure, just then making a feeble effort to lift itself upright, but falling back with a groaning curse of pain.

By this time the crowd from Gopher Slope was drawing near, led by the long-legged thimble-rigger, all eager to learn the cause of the shot and the scream.

Nathan Knight saw them coming, as Norine, half-fainting with fear and excitement, clung convulsively to his protecting arms. She was too sorely agitated to give anything like a fair explanation of the unfortunate adventure, and Bouncer Bragg was too proud, or too safe in his innocence of all wrong, to make an open appeal in that direction.

"Take me home! Take me home!" the poor girl sobbed, shivering anew at each fresh shout from the advancing crowd.

Doubtless Hugh Chadwick saw something of this, for he hurriedly turned back to where the relatives stood, speaking quickly:

"Better take her away, Mr. Knight! I'll help you with her to town, and then come back to investigate this ugly business."

"Just keep the crowd from pressing us too closely, please," coldly said Knight, covering the face of his sobbing niece with her veil, then half-leading, half-carrying her toward town.

Possibly he might have been forced to pause to explain what had happened, only for the influence of the judge. With him to assist, Norine was quickly past the crowd, and on her way to the hotel, without clearing Bouncer Bragg, or, in fact, fully realizing just what had taken place.

As but one shot had been fired, and a man was lying among the rocks, clearly injured, Fred Galloway began to suspect that he might possibly have jumped to a wrong conclusion. Still, he held Bouncer Bragg covered and helpless until the crowd came near enough to make escape on his part an impossibility.

"I saw a lady struggling in that ruffian's clutch," coldly explained Bouncer Bragg. "She screamed out for help, and I shot him. That's all the explanation I can give: take it or leave it, as suits you best."

The identity of the wounded man was quickly established, and the common excitement was by no means lessened when Shanghai Draper, in husky but vicious tones, offered an explanation, broken by spasms of pain:

"I didn't—no hurt! I jest saw gal—rattler jumped at her, an' I yanked her 'way! Then—some critter—plugged me!"

Bouncer Bragg, paler than customary, but in no other wise betraying fear or excitement, listened until that broken excuse was ended. He saw numerous eyes turning toward him, the majority curious, but a few with ugly suspicions causing them to glitter wickedly. He surely must have known that danger was brewing, but conscious of his own innocence of criminal intent, he disdained to repeat his defense, already given.

Then Hugh Chadwick, who had been stooping over Draper, cried out:

"Yes, the poor fellow is shot—and from behind, too!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A NECK ENDANGERED.

EVEN before he had time to cast a glance around, Hugh Chadwick felt that he had not entirely wasted his breath. It was not so much the words he spoke, as the tone he spoke them in, that called forth those threatening scowls and ugly mutterings from the crowd.

Nor was Shanghai Draper too badly injured to let slip the chance offered him, for, with a gasping curse against his enemy, he cried:

"Shot abind! Never give me no show, gents! An' me not a-doin'—an' me jest—*ough!*"

Bouncer Bragg knew that the tide was beginning to set against him, but even yet he could not believe that his neck was really in peril.

He had told the simple truth. He had left town, disgusted by the manner in which his improvised rostrum had been deserted by the fickle crowd, and while musing over the inconstancy of the public, among other things, he had, purely by chance, caught sight of Norine Law-

rence as she sat on a stone, her bowed figure outlined against the sky.

Of course he had no definite idea who she really was, or that anything like personal peril menaced her; but his curiosity was awakened, and his steps quickened, to become a run, when Shanghai Draper rose from his drunken slumbers to accost the maiden.

Even then Bouncer Bragg had refrained from shouting forth a warning, partly because he expected to relieve the lady from further annoyance, and a noisy altercation might call unpleasant attention to her. But when Draper used actual violence, and Bouncer Bragg caught a fair view of that pale, scared face, he drew and fired, without stopping to count the possible cost.

"It does look just a little tough," gravely added the judge, drawing back from the wounded knave, his eyes flashing over the gathering, but lingering for a brace of seconds on that pale, cold visage. "Of course you made sure that Draper was in the wrong, Mr. Bragg? You hailed him, before shooting?"

"He lies ef he says it!" exploded Shanghai, who was beginning to rally from the first numbing effects of his hurt. "He didn't do no sech—jest shot me from the back! Jest butchered me!"

"An' him putt in turrible skeer o' his sweet life, a'ready, by the orful woman who wanted to—oh, mournful Jemima! Fan me with a club, some o' ye, 'fore I go faint!"

Hugh Chadwick cast another keen glance around, and at a silent signal from those speaking orbs, a tall, reputable seeming figure came to the front, lifting a hand as though to command silence.

"This is no time for clumsy jests, gentlemen! A man, right or wrong, has been shot down, it may be to his death. If he has been murdered, he must be avenged! If he was rightly punished, then we should clear the man who dealt out retribution."

"I never—ef ye hunt, mebbe—'twas a big rattler, an' when the gal squawled out fer skeer, what else could I do?"

That desperate explanation, sprinkled liberally with oaths and groans, caused a mild sort of sensation among the gathering, and while feet went up, eyes went downward, in quest of the deadly serpent.

"Hurry up, Doc!" cried Chadwick, catching sight of the physician whom Blattmacher had failed to find the night before. "Your skill is needed, here! See if you can't brace the poor devil up, long enough, at least, for the rights of this ugly matter to be found out."

"He never giv' me no show! Never a show! Jest butchered me! Shot like a dog! From—abind the back o' me!"

Already half delirious, Shanghai Draper clung tenaciously to that one idea; if he could secure revenge, death might not be so hideous!

While the doctor, looking "more than rocky" after his recent debauch, as one of his intimates took occasion to whisper to his nearest neighbor, Robert Maginley, the tall man brought forward by the eyes of the mine-owner, took advantage of the opportunity to question Bouncer Bragg, more particularly.

Nothing new was elicited. He had seen a lady trying to break away from one whom he knew to be a reckless, unprincipled tough. She screamed for help, and fearing for her life, he had fired a single shot.

"I was too far away to save the lady if, as I had good cause to believe, the fellow meant to throw her down. She could not have escaped serious injury in falling among these rocks, and might have been killed. So, gentlemen, I did just what any other white man would have done: I shot the rascal, and shot to kill!"

"From abind his back, mind ye!" cried an ugly voice from the crowd. "Ef Shanghai'd bin facin' t'other way, bet yer sweet life he wouldn't 'a' bin so stiddy a shot!"

"An' Shang jest reskin' life to save her from a rattler!"

"It's a put-up job, fer he knowed Shang'd be playin' even ef he hed even the ghost of a show!"

From mouth to mouth similar cries ran, and with each sentence more hands clinched, and more eyes caught the mad fever which never runs its course without doing murder, unless checked at its inception by heroic treatment.

Already deep-toned voices were calling for a rope and a limb, when Solemn Saul, who had been standing back, like one taking notes, sharply cried aloud, hoping to stem the tide in time:

"Don't be in sech a tarnal rush, gents! Give a man a show!"

"Kick him out, and save dirtying another rope!"

"Hang 'em both! They're nothing but a brace of skin sharps, anyway!"

"Call it three of a kind, gentlemen!" came the clear, cool voice of Fred Galloway, as he forced a passage through the uneasy crowd, to stop near Bouncer Bragg and the Sad Man. "Of course I'd hate mightily to hurt or be hurt, but—play white, if it breaks the bank!"

"Did he play Shanghai white—s-a-y?"

"That's just what we want to find out, retorted the little sport, his white, soft hands

resting lightly at his middle, as yet without weapons in his grasp, but those who knew him best, best knew how quickly guns would show and speak in case of need. "Shang says one thing, this gentleman another."

"Course he'd try to lie out o' the rope!"

"You're authority on such points, of course," bowed Galloway, shrewdly playing for a laugh, knowing from past experience that it is the sullen mob one needs to fear. "But you're rushing the game out of all reason. One word from the lady will prove which man is in the wrong."

The little sport was a man of weight in Gopher Slope, and it is possible that he would have gained the point he was playing for, despite the odds against him. But, unfortunately, as after events proved, Bouncer Bragg saw fit to speak for himself, just then.

"If I've done wrong, I'm ready to pay the full penalty, gentlemen," he said, his voice sounding so cold as to be almost harsh. "The lady can clear me, I know, but—I'll surrender to the marshal, yonder, to await the result. The lady was too badly frightened to risk questioning, and—"

"Mebbe she'll tell too mighty much fer him!"

"That's it—fer a thousand!"

During all this, Hugh Chadwick had kept himself pretty well in the background, after casting forth that first firebrand. But now, growing cooler with the passage of time, he dropped a hurried whisper into the ear of David Arnold, who was just reaching the scene of excitement:

"Arrest, hold safe, must have talk before lynch!"

The marshal nodded his comprehension, then pressed forward, to drop a heavy hand on Bragg's shoulder, saying:

"I reckon I'll have to take you, stranger, before it grows any hotter! Give me your gun, and—"

"Thanks, gentle sir! I ask no greater favor," bowed the Boomer, once more his usual self.

"As a general thing I just dote on a crowd, but—well, this assembly is growing just a trifle too enthusiastic!"

Ugly looks began to turn into ugly words, and there were signs of a dangerous outbreak as Dave Arnold disarmed his prisoner. But Hugh Chadwick sprang into the breach, passing through the crowd, bidding the men wait for justice to decide.

"If he wasn't justified in shooting Draper, be sure Gopher Slope will call him to a full account. If he was—well, don't make matters worse by hanging the wrong man!"

The judge might easily have picked his words more wisely, but his influence was sufficient, backed up as it was by the attitude of Gallus Fred and Solemn Saul, to hold the mob in check until Dave Arnold had cleared their ranks.

"While I hardly think this gent will give you any trouble, David," coolly observed the little sport, giving Sunday a side nod, "I reckon we might as well bar you company to town."

"I have no wish to make an escape," said Bouncer Bragg, with an odd smile and shoulder-shrug. "Just at present I'm a most ardent advocate of law and order!"

"Maybe it's wiser to laugh than to cry, but if I was in your boots, stranger, reckon I'd want to be seen little and heard less," grimly observed the marshal, casting an uneasy glance backward.

"The worst is over, and I'm not weeping tears of bitter disappointment over that fact," replied Galloway. "I hardly thought the gang would take a bluff, but—whither bound, David? To the stone jug?"

Arnold hesitated before replying. In fact, he had not yet fully decided upon his proper course. If Hugh Chadwick wished to have a talk with the arrested man—

"Well, I'm not so sure. Reckon, though, I'll take him to my house, first. 'Tisn't as though he was dead-sure guilty, you know, Fred."

"Well, I should remark! I wouldn't condemn a cur on the unsupported word of Shang Draper, and—we'll take you to the Pluribus, friend, if you think Miss Knight can fairly clear you of all blame."

"Not now," came the cold answer. "Of course her evidence will be needed to clear me, but—give her time to rally from the shock. I'm more than willing to spend a few hours in such good society," with a courteous bow toward his captor.

Nothing more was said until the house in which David Arnold lived, was reached, Solemn Saul and Fred Galloway bearing them company to the threshold. Then the little sport tapped the marshal on an arm, smiling into his face after a peculiar fashion as he spoke:

"It may be cutting wind to waste, David, but, all the same, I want to tell you just this much: keep your eye open, and your wits about you! If there should come any after-clap, and the gang make a try for lynching, don't you forget to sound the alarm loud enough for other ears to hear. Shoot fast, if you don't shoot to kill! And—don't forget, old fellow!—the plea of imperfect shells won't excuse your silence!"

Without pausing for a reply, Galloway turned and strode away, the Sad Man bearing him company. When around the corner, Galloway asked:

"Who and what is that fellow, pardner?"

"You tell, boss! I don't know him from Adam! Wish't I did though!"

"Well, seems like I'd ought to know him!" frowned the little sport.

CHAPTER XXII.

A FREE-HANDED PHILANTHROPIST.

HUGH CHADWICK apparently had eyes only for the city marshal and his prisoner, until they had won fairly clear of the crowd, and were safely on their way to town. Then, without paying any attention to the scowling looks and sulky mutterings of the more bloodthirsty portion of that assembly, he made his way to the side of the wounded man, standing in silence for a brief space, watching the movements of the doctor.

These might have been steadier, for the physician had hardly recovered from his regular Saturday night drunk, but the man evidently knew what he was about. He had had no little practice in cuts and gunshot-wounds during his years of drifting from town to town, and despite his failings from a moral point of view, Chadwick knew that his professional opinion could be relied upon.

"What's the show, Doc?" asked the judge, when the physician gave over that examination, to prepare bandages for the wound.

"Well, it might be better, and I have seen worse cases. The lead made two holes, so there's no complications to be feared on that point. No vital organ was touched, and if Shang had been a gentleman, instead of a chronic rounder, I'd be willing to stake my reputation on pulling him through. As it is—doubtful!"

"Don't—you kin save me, Doc?" groaned the injured man.

"If bad whisky will let me! Now, Shang, if you had been content to hit the bottle after the fashion of a gentleman—but no! You just lay by it, like a fattening hog by its trough!"

It was a case of pot and kettle, but Draper was too much in fear of death to improve the opening given him, and Hugh Chadwick had far too many weighty points on his mind, to waste time in chaffing speeches.

"Well, do your level best for the poor fellow, Doc, and I'll stand the damage. Let all other patients slide, save those you absolutely have to attend, and send your bill to me."

"I'll do it, judge, and I only wish I had a score of patients in whom you took a like interest!" chuckled the doctor, his hands as busy as his tongue the while.

Hugh Chadwick turned away, to make still another point. Though the crowd had permitted their prey to slip through their fingers without an open attempt at lynching, there were no lack of black looks and low, ominous mutterings. It was no difficult matter for an old hand like the judge to pick out the few who were so industriously sowing the seeds of evil, but if he had a purpose in taking such notes, he gave no outward signs.

"Friends, all!" he cried, lifting a hand to ask attention. "Men of Gopher Slope, whom I am proud to call my friends! You all know me, and you ought to know that I have your good in view when I ask you to let me give you a word of advice. May I go on?"

There was an almost unanimous consent, and Chadwick spoke on:

"As one of you, I ask that no hasty action may be taken in this unfortunate affair. True, a man has been shot down, without a chance to defend himself, but it is barely possible that he merited the punishment. That is a point which ought to be fully cleared up, before any decided action is taken."

"Then Shang hain't to be paid fer?"

"If the facts justify it, he shall be fully avenged! But, I ask you as a fellow-citizen, give the law a fair chance to do justice to everybody. If Bouncer Bragg is guilty, I'll be among the very first to demand that he pay the full penalty!"

Without waiting for arguments, pro or con, Hugh Chadwick bowed, then turned back to where the wounded man lay, to say:

"Do your best for him, doctor, and I'll see to having quarters prepared for his reception. Spare no pains, for I'm paying all bills."

While clearing the crowd, Chadwick took occasion to pass close to Bart Clough, who had been drawn to the scene with others, and without a noticeable pause, the judge contrived to whisper:

"Watch for me, at my house. Business!"

Without glancing back to see how accurately Clough had caught his meaning, Hugh Chadwick hastened back to town, going direct to Pluribus Hotel, where he found Nathan Knight, standing on the little porch which extended across the front of the building.

"Unfortunate affair—very!" nodded the judge, removing his hat to wipe his heated brow, flinching a bit as his hand touched the wound given him by Hungry Mike Dobson, but which Polly Maydew had neatly covered with courtplaster.

"The rascal deserved all he got—and more!" frowned Knight.

"Maybe so, but he swore he was simply trying to save the lady from being bitten by a rattlesnake."

"He lied! He tried to—if he lives through his hurt, I'll break every bone in his vile carcass!"

"Well, I fear you will have to wait a month or two, if he pulls through at all; but that isn't what I stopped to ask. The lady? She was not seriously injured, I trust, dear sir?"

"Not bodily, but she was terribly frightened. She is lying down, now, and I'm in hopes—is there no physician to be had in this infernal hole, sir?"

"There's but one resident, and he's attending to the wounded man. If you would consent to honor me by transferring to my house, Mrs. Maydew, my housekeeper, is a famous nurse, and—"

"Thanks, but we will not impose on your good nature quite so far. I'll manage, I reckon," stiffly bowed the agent.

"At least, you will give the young lady her choice?" persisted the judge. "This place is good enough, from a Gopher Slope point of view, but it's hardly the sort of place to—"

"I will deliver your kind message, Mr. Chadwick," with another bow. "And now—who was the gentleman who shot yonder villain?"

"Gentleman? Oh, you mean Bouncer Bragg," with a curl of his full lip. "Just a traveling fraud, I reckon! One of those street fakirs, who make a living off of the fools they pick up, running loose without a guardian!"

"He didn't look like—"

"That's part of his profession, my dear sir," bowing as part apology for the interruption. "Still, I'll give him credit as far as the case warrants: he made a crack shot!"

"You surely don't mean—The fellow wasn't killed?"

"Not outright, but I hardly think he'll ever see the sun set."

"But—I thought, from what you said just now—"

"That he had several months of life before him? Well, I hardly meant that as my honest opinion as to his show for pulling through. You spoke of beating the fellow, and I reckoned he was safe from that for a time, at least. And—I hate to say it, sir, but if there must be an inquest, your niece will be called upon to give her evidence."

"She shall not! I'll never consent to that, at least!" flashed Mr. Knight, his face flushing hotly.

"I hardly see how you can avoid it, my dear sir, and why should you? Of course 'twill be a mere matter of form. If Draper really insulted her, as you say, why—"

"Don't I tell you he did?"

"Then, a few words from her lips may save an innocent man from pulling bemp!"

"What do you mean by that, sir? Surely they can't harm a gentleman for lending aid to a woman in peril!"

"Possibly not, back in the centers of civilization, but out here, it's altogether different. If Draper had been hit in front, matters wouldn't look nearly so dark, but as he was shot from behind, without warning, or a chance to pull his gun, men will talk. And worse!"

"Is there no such thing as law and order in this wretched place? Show me how, and I'll spend every dollar—"

The recollection that he had not a dollar about his person, caused Nathan Knight to leave his impetuous speech incomplete. He shrunk back a bit, flushing hotly and looking greatly embarrassed, but Hugh Chadwick was too politic to remark, even if he noticed.

"There may be no further trouble. I hope not. There was a move toward lynching, but I put a stop to all such hasty action, and if the young lady will consent to make a public explanation—say on the morrow—there may be no further trouble. Provided, of course, your belief as to her being insulted by Draper proves correct."

"I can answer for that much. Still, if it is to save an innocent man, my niece herself will insist on publicly exonerating Mr. Bragg."

"Well, to-morrow will do for that clearance, no doubt. Now—of course you're not in the humor for talking business, my dear sir, but—pray tell me what was in the bit of paper you offered me, just before that unfortunate occurrence?"

Nathan Knight gave a slight start, his gray eyes keenly fixing on that grave face before him for a brief space before he spoke:

"You have the paper itself, Mr. Chadwick?"

"I? No, indeed! Don't you remember? I thrust it back into your own hand, when that cry startled us."

"Are you perfectly sure of what you say, sir?" slowly asked Knight, still keenly scrutinizing that strong face.

"Entirely sure, sir! Why, you put it into your pocket—I think!"

"Indeed I did not, and if you haven't got it, the paper must have dropped to the ground, unheeded by either of us."

"The deuce you say!" exploded the judge, scowling blackly. "I'll go hunt for it, at once, before any one else can pick it up!"

He was starting away, in hot haste, when his steps were checked by the voice of the agent.

"It's hardly worth taking so much trouble for, Mr. Chadwick. There was neither address

nor signature to the note, and even if found by an outsider, it can do very little harm—if any."

"But you said—What did you say?"

"I forget. But I can give you an accurate idea of what that note would have said, had you opened and read its contents. That, in place of buying your partner out of the Neverfail Mine, you sold all your title, rights and interest in the property, to him!"

Hugh Chadwick stood with widely opened eyes, his lower jaw drooping sufficiently to give a glimpse of his teeth through his beard. He seemed stunned by that deliberately uttered sentence, but when he did rally, his denial came sharp and forcible:

"Whoever dares even hint such a thing, sir, is a liar and a cur! I can prove my rights, sir! I am the sole owner of the Neverfail, and if you, or any other man, can point out even the shadow of a cloud on my title, I'll give you or them the property for nothing!"

"Well, I received just such a warning, and, of course, you must expect me to move slowly, until all is made perfectly clear."

"All right, sir! I'll expect you in the morning, and I'll relieve you of all doubts, never fear," bowed Chadwick, turning toward his own home; and one hand entered his bosom, to touch that very paper!

CHAPTER XXIII.

TRYING TO READ THE RIDDLE.

SOLEMN SAUL SUNDAY shot a curious glance at the little sport, whose face plainly showed no slight mental disturbance, and trusting to catch him off his guard, the Sad Man ventured:

"Mebbe he didn't war a full baird when ye knowed him afore? Sufferin' Jerusha! don't chaw a pore critter fer jest axin', stranger!"

"Don't jump at conclusions, then, stranger," nodded Galloway, a smile taking the place of that frown. "I never saw the gentleman before, to my knowledge, and I'm not so sure I'll see him again—in good health, that is!"

"You don't reckon—an' jest fer pluggin' a no-count critter like that aigg-tosser?"

"Not if I can hinder it. Is he a friend of yours?"

"Waal, not to say jest a pard," hesitated the thimble-rigger. "He works one sort o' game, an' I run nother, ye see. But—waa, ef they do yank Bouncer up a tree, mebbe they'll want to make a pair of it, an' keep it all in the same line o' business. See?"

"Which makes your throat feel uneasy, eh?" laughed Galloway. "Well, I hardly reckon they'll carry matters that far, but 'twill do no harm for you to keep both eyes open. If you learn of trouble brewing, just raise an alarm, and we'll do what we can."

"But—I say, sport!"

"See you later, pardner!" called out Galloway, without slackening his brisk pace. "Can't stop, now. All eyes open, and good luck!"

For all his pretended haste, Fred Galloway not only slackened up, but came to a full stop when where he could catch his first glimpse of the Pluribus Hotel. It took but a single glance from his keen eyes to recognize Hugh Chadwick in the man Nathan Knight was holding converse with, and he waited until the judge turned off in the direction of his own house, before drawing nearer.

Nathan Knight was gazing after the owner of the Neverfail, his brows contracted, his thin, stern lips compressed. So absorbed was he in this, that the little sport came within easy greeting distance before his approach was detected, else that interview might have been harder to secure.

"Good-morning, Mr. Knight," said Galloway, doffing his hat, respectfully. "May I ask if Miss Knight is feeling any better?"

The elder gentleman turned with a start, and his face lightened up somewhat as he recognized the speaker. Only for an instant. His original dislike flashed into life again, and he looked as though he would have preferred meeting almost any other person, just then.

"I thought you might be waiting to hear what I had found out concerning—the gentleman we spoke of, last evening—and so—"

"Never mind names; what did you find out?" eagerly interrupted the agent, forgetting the man in the possible tidings.

"That he has left town, for one thing," said Galloway, ascending to the porch, adding in lower tones: "Wouldn't it be just as well to do our talking inside, sir? Men will listen, if they get a chance, you know."

Expecting far more than he was fated to receive, Nathan Knight led the way to the little back parlor in which Norine and he had taken their morning meal, closing the door which opened into the hall, then speaking with poorly disguised eagerness:

"You have made some discovery, Mr. Galloway: out with it."

Before an answer could be given, there came a light, swift footfall, and the door swinging open, gave admittance to Norine Lawrence, twin spots of scarlet marking her otherwise pale face, her hands extended as she greeted the little sport.

"I feared you would not come, dear sir! I

thank you—I cannot even begin to express my thanks for your—I was frightened nearly to death by that wicked man."

Fred Galloway made no bones about accepting those extended hands, pressing them warmly between his own, but he could not well claim anything more.

"You are mistaken, Miss Knight. I was not the fortunate man to aid you, though I'd give a hand if I had been so blessed."

"Come, come, both of you!" frowned Nathan Knight, by no means pleased, but Norine did not heed, if she heard.

"I thought—surely, sir, I heard—I saw your face before—"

"I was there, but entirely too late to claim any credit for your rescue, Miss Knight," almost ruefully admitted the little sport, who was evidently "hard hit" by his fellow passenger.

He gave a brief, but clear account of his connection with the case, generously giving Bouncer Bragg full credit for his services, but slipping in a word for himself at the end.

"I'd sacrifice a hand if I might have been a few seconds earlier, Miss Knight, but—"

"Why do you still call me by that name? I am Norine Lawrence, sir, and I trust—"

"Norine!" sharply interposed her uncle. "Remember what—"

"Mr. Galloway is a true friend, sir, and I am sure we will do well to trust him implicitly."

"You do me nothing more than justice, Miss Lawrence," gravely bowed the younger man. "I am on honor, from this moment, and my dearest wish is that I may be able to prove my gratitude for your trust, by serving you in some material manner."

"You knew my father—nay, uncle," with a faint, sad smile, as another interruption was offered. "For once I mean to have my own way. I feel that we can trust this gentleman, and if I trust at all, it must be without mental reservation."

"If I fail you, or betray your trust, Miss Lawrence, may God desert me in my hour of sorest need!" earnestly declared the gambler, and there was something in his face and voice that convinced even Nathan Knight they would never have cause to regret this impulsive confidence.

"You knew my father," repeated Norine. "You promised to make inquiries concerning him, as we were on our way to town, last evening. You have—brought—good tidings?"

Her cheeks grew pale while forcing herself to ask that question, and Galloway did not reply until after he had led her to a seat on the rather primitive lounge standing against the wall.

"Don't forget that no news is good news, Miss Lawrence," with far more cheerfulness than he actually felt, just then. "I did not find your father, but at last accounts he was well and in good spirits."

"When was that?" asked Nathan Knight, only to bite his lips sharply the next instant, warned too late by that swift glance. "But we wish to get at the bottom facts, after all," growing grave, almost hard. "If you will lend an ear, Mr. Galloway, I'll show you just how the case stands, from our point of view."

"You said that you witnessed the sale of the mining property called Neverfail, by Ethelbert Lawrence, to Hugh Chadwick?"

"I witnessed a transfer which I was told meant just that, sir."

"You were personally acquainted with Lawrence, of course?"

"I knew him well, by sight. There was no close intimacy between us, however," with a faint flush as he added: "Lawrence was quiet, reserved, while I naturally belonged to the gay, sporting class."

"Still, you could not well be deceived in the man? You are positive that it was Ethelbert Lawrence who made that transfer?"

"I am perfectly safe in saying yes, to that, Mr. Knight. It was the gentleman I always knew as Ethelbert Lawrence. There were other witnesses, however, and doubtless they will say the same thing."

"Can you recall any of those present?"

"Yes. One was Darius Godkin, your present host. Shall I ask him to step this way, sir?"

"If you will be so obliging," with a grave bow. "That is, if you think he may be trusted?" with sudden suspicion in voice and eyes.

"I'll answer for him, if you'll permit me to drop a hint in his ear as we come," quietly answered the little sport, then beating a retreat to the office, from whence he quickly returned, with Godkin in his company.

Closing the door behind them, and waiting until the Yankee had made his punctilious bow to the lady, Galloway bluntly began:

"Now, Darius, business! You were one of the witnesses to the sale of the Neverfail. Who sold it, and who bought him out?"

"Ethelbert Lawrence sold, an' Hugh Chadwick bought."

"You are perfectly sure it was Lawrence, then?"

"Sure as I be that I'm my own mother's son," declared the landlord. "I knowed the gentle-

man like a book. He of'en put up here: always, in fact, when he didn't bunk in at the works. He spent his last night in town under this ruff. An' I've got his signatoor on my register: the last he ever writ' in Gopher Slope. I know, for I shuck good-by with him, bright an' airly the next mornin', when he pulled out in the stage, homeward bound, as he told me with his own lips—yes, sir!"

"Can you recall the precise date, Mr. Godkin?" asked Nathan Knight, moving slightly, so as to hide Norine's growing agitation.

"Not to a hour, so to speak, sir, but I kin tell by lookin' at the register. Shell I?"

"If you will be so kind. Make a note of the date, please, and bring the slip to this door, if you will."

Another low bow, and Darius Godkin hastened away to oblige his patron, no less than the ever free-handed little sport. And as the door closed behind the gaunt figure, Nathan Knight spoke to Galloway:

"I couldn't afford to say too much to him, even though you vouch for his reliability, my young friend, but—listen!"

"I have here the last letter my niece ever received from her father, Ethelbert Lawrence. You shall see it, since Norine has confessed so much, but not until after the landlord brings his note."

"That shall be just as Miss Lawrence deems best," gravely. "I wish to serve her, if I can find any method of doing so; but I will look at nothing without her free and full permission."

"Show him the letter, uncle," unsteadily spoke up the maiden.

"I will—after. But I can tell you this much," speaking hurriedly, with a cautious glance toward the door, lest the landlord be returning: "In this letter, Ethelbert tells Norine that he has just bought out his partner, and that he feels confident a few more months will prove he has made his fortune!"

"You are sure? Wait!" as his keen ear caught the sound of a footfall in the passageway. "Godkin is coming with his date!"

Galloway met the landlord at the door, receiving the slip of paper, and leaving a dollar in the willing hand that met his. He closed the door, crossed back, to hand the slip to Norine, who gave the freshly written date a single glance, then sunk back on the lounge, with a low, gasping sob of pain or terror.

"I knew it!" gratingly exclaimed Knight, after a glance at the bit of paper. "Two weeks later than the letter! Norine, pet! Come—to your room, my poor girl!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE JUDGE MAKES A WATER-HAUL.

HIS fingers closing over the very paper which he had so positively denied retaining, Hugh Chadwick hastened away from the hotel, heading toward his own house.

He did not venture a backward glance, lest the suspicions of the agent be strengthened thereby, but he kept flashing his eyes from side to side, eager to learn just what were the contents of that paper, yet fearing to risk its examination while in the open street.

Events were crowding so rapidly, one on another's heels, that his usually cool, ever-ready wits failed to serve him as readily as they might, and it was not until almost at his house, that he remembered the whispered hint he had let drop into the ear of Bart Clough.

This was recalled to mind, however, by his catching sight of that far from reputable looking-fellow, skulking near the building, and his hurried steps abruptly slackened. If he thought to turn back or aside in time to escape recognition by those eyes, he was doomed to disappointment, and realizing as much from the manner in which Clough started forward, the judge kept on.

"Didn't look fer ye in sech a hurry, boss, but I'm one o' the breed as al'ays wants to be on deck in good time," grinned the rascal, meeting those frowning eyes, unabashed by his recent confession. "Fact is, ye see, I'm jest shoal on the bar, and a few dollars'd come in turrible handy!"

"I haven't time to talk with you now, Bart," muttered the judge, but slipping a hand into his pocket, to draw it forth with a few loose coins. "Take this; but don't get drunk, or I'll have nothing more to say to you—bear that in mind, my pretty fellow!"

"On a'count, I reckon?" grinned the rascal, half-maliciously, as he pocketed the coin.

"No, sir! I have not admitted that I owe you a cent! All I say is just this: come back here when I am at leisure, and I'll talk over the past with you. Provided you comesober, remember!"

"All right, jedge. I'll be in hearin' when you call fer me, or, ef ye don't want to strain the lungs o' ye, jest flare a light 'cross the winder in your room, an' I'll show up, too quick!"

"That will do. If you drink at all, dip lightly. It's just possible that I may have some work for you to do before long."

"Then it'll be cash down, jedge! I'm done givin' long credit!" Bart Clough said, with grim emphasis, slouching off toward the more thickly settled portion of Gopher Slope.

"You'd better be careful, my fine rascal!" inwardly muttered the mine-owner, while crossing his yard to the front door. "I may pay you off, for good and all, if you talk too mighty loud!"

Without meeting Polly Maydew, who was in the domestic portion of the building, Hugh Chadwick entered his private room, closing and locking the door behind him. Then he drew forth that crumpled slip of paper, unfolding it, and drinking in its brief contents almost at a glance.

There was neither address nor signature, and the words read as follows:

"Ethelbert Lawrence bought his partner's share of the Neverfail, instead of selling out, as claimed. Ask Hugh Chadwick what he did with his former partner!"

A fierce, almost choking curse boiled up in the man's throat as his eyes drank in those few, but decidedly significant words; but then he staggered back, sinking into a chair, crushing that paper in his hand. His entire frame shook and shivered as with a violent ague. His face turned almost purple, then slowly faded until he looked actually corpse-like, save for his wildly glittering eyes.

Though severe, this spasm was of brief duration. Save that one hot imprecation, not a sound escaped his throat. And, rallying, the judge staggered across the room to the little cupboard, pouring forth and swallowing two full glasses of strong whisky.

This done, he returned to his seat, once more opening that accusing paper, trying to read the riddle by studying each letter, each stroke of the pen. But here, too, he found himself foiled.

"It isn't his writing—curses weigh him down forever! Who did write it, then? Who could—Ha!" springing to his feet as though it had suddenly grown red-hot.

Right or wrong, a possible solution offered itself, and after a few minutes spent in calming his shaken nerves, and trying to decide just how he could best put his latest suspicions to the test, Hugh Chadwick left his house and walked rapidly back to town, pausing only when at the front door of the building owned and occupied by David Arnold.

Before he could rap, the door was opened by the city marshal, who made way for his entrance, speaking briskly:

"I saw you coming, judge, and I'm mighty glad to see you, too!"

"He's all right? The fellow you run in, Dave?"

"Bouncer Bragg, as he gives his name? Yes, he's all right, so far, but—is he going to stay that way, long?" his voice sinking lower as he asked that question.

"I'm afraid that depends on others, David," with a fleeting smile. "I wish to see your prisoner, marshal. I may!"

"Why not, if you wish it, judge? Shall I go in with you?"

"He's not so dangerous as all that comes to, is he?"

"No, I reckon not, but—honest, judge, blamed if I don't believe he's a regular crank! If he isn't clean loony, then he plays it off mighty fine, now I'm giving it to you straight!"

"A mighty poor defense against such a judge and jury as Gopher Slope can turn out, David!" grimly nodded Chadwick. "Still, I'll run the risk of his harming me, if you'll take the chances of my setting him at liberty."

"I'm not so mighty sure I'd hinder, even if I could," frowned the marshal, as he led the way toward the room in which his charge was confined for the time being. "I'm afraid the boys'll kick up a row!"

"Tell you better after I've had a chat with the crank," whispered Chadwick, as Arnold slipped a key into the lock. "Wait in the other room for me, pard. I'll take care of the key."

Giving up the key, Arnold swung the door open, saying, gruffly:

"Gent to see you, Bouncer! Treat him white, or you'll miss it!"

"That will do, marshal," blandly said the judge, pushing the door shut, then facing the prisoner with: "Sorry to see you in such hard luck, Mr. Bragg, and if I can do anything to help you, pray command me."

"Thanks, awfully, gentle stranger," bowed Boomer, rising to his feet and producing a printed card, which he extended toward his visitor. "Can't I sell you a ticket of admission to Blissful Buttes, my noble friend? Just one dollar, not as payment, but as a guarantee of good faith on both sides. Get it back when you present this card, which entitles bearer to two weeks inspection of the grandest, most glorious sanitarium ever—eh?"

Hugh Chadwick had not uttered a word to cut that voluble flood short, but his keen, steady gaze seemed to throw even that glib tongue out of gear. It was as though he sought to read what lay behind that sandy beard and deeply bronzed skin.

"My good fellow, do you know that your very life is in imminent peril?" seriously asked the judge, paying no attention to that proffered card. "Do you know that, at any moment, a raging mob may break into this house, to lynch you?"

"You don't tell me so!"

"But I do tell you, man!"

"A mob, I believe you said! That means a greater number than any one man can fight, of course? And that man without even a pop-gun?"

"Fifty armed men couldn't save your neck from the rope, if the mob once gets fairly under headway!"

"And I'm only one poor, lone critter!" sighed the Boomer. "Well, if that's the case, I reckon whining won't mend matters any. And—I've heard tell that hanging don't hurt much—after the first brief pang! And so—better let me sell you a ticket, judge?"

Hugh Chadwick with no little difficulty choked back a curse of rage. More strongly than ever he doubted this man, but do his best he could not confirm the startling suspicion which had flashed across his excited brain after reading that paper. He knew that Bouncer Bragg was surely playing a part, but—what part? And for what ends?

"If I'm to pull hemp, as you so kindly insinuate, gentle stranger, this is your last chance to rake in much for little, to win a fortune through risking a poor, lonesome dollar! For, of course, if their most reliable agent should come to grief here, the company would never dream of sending another emissary to Gopher Slope. So—have a ticket?"

"Bah!" with an impatient gesture, his gaze growing still more intense, if such a thing were possible. "Why will you continue playing the buffoon, while your very life hangs trembling in the balance?"

"Buffoon goes, since you are my guest, Mr. Chadwick," bowed Bouncer Bragg, with grave courtesy. "As for the remainder of your speech, I thought you settled all that, when you declared that, should the mob take a notion to rise, fifty armed men couldn't save my life. Are you prepared to offer sixty, as a body-guard, gentle sir?"

"I've already done more than a regiment of ordinary men could have brought to pass. I broke up the mob that was already forming for the express purpose of lynching you. I am ready to do as much more, at the risk of my own life, if you will prove yourself worthy. So—who and what are you, man?"

"I'm my father's son, with and by the free will and consent of my gentle mother—the saints give her rest in glory! I was born Bragg, and christened Bouncer, probably for my india-rubber propensities: I ate up an overshoe before I cut my third tooth! I was educated—"

"Are you crazy, man?"

"I can tell a hawk from a heronshaw, if I see them both on the wing, and I've got the keenest scent for villains that ever you found out of a sensational novel! I can tell when one crosses my wind, without wasting a second scent, and—did you speak, gentle stranger?"

If so, 'twas a word or two which would hardly look well in cold type. The judge knew that Bouncer Bragg was mocking at him, under that thin veneer, and this, added to the stubborn fact that he was still in doubt as to what face really lay back of that grizzled beard, rendered him very unfit for coping with a cool customer like this.

Still, he did not like to beat a retreat, wholly unsatisfied, and he made one more effort.

"Will you pledge me your word of honor that you'll not attempt to escape, if I take you to a snug hiding-place in my own house, until this ugly storm blows over, Mr. Bragg?"

"Thanks, awfully, dear sir, but I must decline. I am in the hands of the law, and its officers are responsible for my life. If I am lynched, doubtless my heirs will bring suit for indemnity; but were I to come to harm under your roof, what show would they have for playing even?"

CHAPTER XXV.

A HINT AND A QUESTION.

HUGH CHADWICK forced a frown at that question, but that failed to entirely cover the mingled anger and confusion born of that smooth speech.

"I begin to believe you are even worse than an idiot, man! I owe you something for what you did last night, but—on my side, I've won at least a few hours for reflection! But now, if you not only scorn to accept my friendly offer, but fling it back with shameless insults, I reckon the sooner I leave you to yourself, the better for us both!"

"My dear, dear sir! How can you so abominably twist and misconstrue the words I surely—and I declined far more on your account than on my own!"

"Then—you'll come with me?"

"No, sir!" with melancholy firmness, his face almost preternaturally serious. "I may not be an angel, when all's told, but I'm too near one at heart to take a step which might end in the ruin of one for whom I now feel—pardon my emotion, gentle magistrate! Notice not if salty globules play leapfrog adown my unshorn cheeks, for—going, gentle stranger? Then—as a last favor—can't I sell you a ticket to Blissful Buttes?"

Hugh Chadwick did not dare trust himself to reply, for he knew that Bouncer Bragg was turning him to ridicule, whether or no he suspected what object brought him to pay that visit. And so thoroughly was he discomfited, that he forgot to play his part through to the end. In place of rapping on the door for the marshal to open, he turned the knob and jerked the barrier wide, slamming it behind him as he crossed the threshold.

A small item, but it went far toward convincing Bouncer Bragg that the judge was his real jailer, working the wires through Dave Arnold.

"You locked the door after you, judge?" asked the marshal, hurrying forward, then taking the key and remedying that oversight. "Well, what luck?" he asked, as his caller dropped into a chair in the little room which was held sacred to the official and his visitors on business.

Hugh Chadwick was in no great haste to make answer. Already he had permitted himself to act on impulse far more than could be called prudent, and matters were taking such a turn now, that a false step could hardly be recalled or covered over with safety.

"Not that I want to pry into your business affairs, you understand, judge," the marshal ventured, further. "But there's already been some pretty ugly words set afloat in town, and of course I'd like to know just how far I'm expected to go, in case any trouble should come to top. See?"

Hugh Chadwick drew a long, full breath. A dull, reddish cast came over his eyes, but the drooping lids quickly veiled that weakness, and when they raised again, few men could have looked more honest than the present owner of the Neverfail Mine.

"You asked me what luck, a bit ago, David? Well, not exactly what I hoped for when I came, but—I know who Bouncer Bragg really is!"

"Then he really is more than he tries to play off?"

"A little more, and a great deal worse, I'm sorry to say, David. I can't name no names, for reasons, but—not to put too fine a point on it—Bouncer Bragg is a fugitive from justice! He really deserves the rope, as part payment for his crimes, but—what would you do, marshal, in case the tough talk you spoke of, should really culminate in a lynch-law rush?"

"Well, I might get together a posse," slowly said Arnold, watching that face to note the effect of each word. "Of course, if the gang came for him in solid earnest, we couldn't bluff 'em off. And, even if we could turn the trick at all, we'd only do it after shooting a dozen or so of the boys."

The judge sat with bowed head resting on a hand, his eyes staring vacantly at the bare floor. For possibly half a minute he remained thus, seemingly pondering over those words. Then, with a long breath and a grave shake of his head, he looked up, to say:

"I'm afraid it's an ugly case, David! I'm dubious we made an error in bringing him to this house, in the first place. There's your wife and family to think of, and—wouldn't it be better to transfer Mr. Bragg to the jug?"

"It's stronger, of course, judge, but—"

"Not right now, of course, David. In broad day, one pair of eyes, backed by a loud tongue, might ruin everything! But if the transfer could be effected—say, at dusk, or soon after?"

"I reckon it could be done, judge," still with that curious hesitation, like one who feels a trap or snare is lying close ahead, but who fears to make an open examination.

"The stone jail would be easier defended, of course," musingly added Chadwick, once more staring at vacancy. "And, too, if the boys knew their game was lodged, they'd hardly be so keen to go for him, as if he lay under a roof like this!"

"That's so, of course. But, judge, if the boys should make a try?"

"Well, you must be your own judge as to that," with a little more briskness in face and voice as his head lifted. "As an officer of the law, you are supposed to defend all prisoners, deeming them innocent until they have been tried and proven guilty. But, there's another ugly fact to bear in mind. If such an attempt should be made, and even a single member of that party came to grief at his or your hands, you know what the consequences would be, David?"

"I don't reckon they'd stop to see just which neck they stretched first!" came the sullen response.

"That's pretty nigh correct," with a decided nod. "Now, David, if I filled your shoes—which I'm mighty glad I don't, just at present—I say, if I stood in your place, while I might beg and plead for mercy to the man under my charge, I'd take good care not to commit suicide!"

"I couldn't be blamed, surely, judge!" exclaimed Arnold, his face lighting up, wonderfully. "I couldn't fight the whole camp, of course, and even if I could—would it pay?"

"That's pretty much the way I'd look at the situation," nodded Chadwick, rising to his feet and putting on his hat. "Of course 't would be very sad should any such trouble arise, but if

matters *did* take such an unfortunate turn, I'd rather see the guilty suffer than the innocent, by long odds!"

"So would I," chuckled the marshal, hearing the judge company as he moved toward the front door. "Then you reckon I'd best make the shift to the jug?"

"I would if I were in your place—yes. It may be trouble spent in vain. The boys may cool down, or they may come to see that Shanghai was in the wrong, and received no more than he deserved. Still—yes, I reckon you'd better make the transfer, marshal!"

With the brisk, springy stride of a man who feels he has performed a public duty, Hugh Chadwick parted from the marshal, turning his face toward the little shanty in which he had left word for a bunk to be prepared for the reception of Shanghai Draper, in case he should rally from his wound sufficiently to bear removal from that rocky rise.

He was by no means sanguine that the removal had taken place, as yet, but the shanty was only slightly out of his direct line, and the next step he had decided upon required him to pay the wounded knave a brief visit.

A swift frown shot across his face as he came in sight of the until then deserted shanty, for he quickly detected signs of occupancy.

"Confound that fellow! When I told Doc I'd pay all bills, I reckoned he'd string 'em out, longer than the moral law! Now—"

But that face expressed nothing save gentle sympathy when, a few moments later, its owner stood near the bunk on which the wounded man was lying, neither awake nor asleep, but in a half-way stupor.

"Doc loaded him with a sleepy charge, jedge," softly whispered the man on guard, one hand holding a few dirty cards behind his back, their faces jealously hidden from the eyes of the man with whom he had been playing when Chadwick interrupted them. "He said Shang hedn't ort to be deesturbed, so to speak, an'—"

"Did he say there was any show for his pulling through?"

"Waal, I didn't jest ax, jedge. 'Fer one thing, I didn't hev much time to do it in, an' then, you know, Doc's a turrible crank when he's soberin' off! An' so, when he pitches onto me fer a nuss, sayin' as how the jedge, meanin' you, boss! When he says as how you paid all bills, why I jest jumped at the lay-out, an' that's pritty much all I know 'bout the game, jedge!"

Hugh Chadwick waited until the fellow's tongue fairly run down, but if his ears were listening, his eyes were devoted to another person altogether. For, in the partner with whom the nurse had been playing poker, the judge recognized Bart Clough!

"Well, do your best for poor Draper, and I'll see that your time is not wasted," he made reply, turning away from the bunk and its stupefied occupant. "Keep strict quiet, and don't let the boys come here in too great force. They're not talking revenge, I trust?"

"Waal, jedge, I'd be lyin' ef I said I hedn't ketched some sort o' hints lookin' that way, but—mebbe 'tain't nothin' more'n wind."

Hugh Chadwick gave Bart Clough a meaning look, then made a significant gesture, which brought back a nod of comprehension. And as he left the shanty, heading once more for his own house, the judge felt pretty well convinced that Draper's nurse would have to rope in another player if he hoped to get rich at poker that day!

Nor was he mistaken, as far as Bart Clough was concerned, for in less than five minutes after he had gained his private room, Hugh Chadwick caught sight of the ragged rascal drawing near.

Polly Maydew, whether she had or had not received instructions to that effect, kept out of sight, and the judge himself admitted his visitor, leading him to the room where they had come so near quarreling on the night last past.

"You wanted me, boss?" asked Clough, half-defiantly. "I'm hopin' it hain't jest to give me more cussin', though!"

"Sit down, Bart," with a nod toward one of the chairs drawn up to the center table. "If there's any cursing done, 'twill be because you bring them down on your own head."

"Ef you reckon I kin be bluffed out o' what I jest know is the straight, clean, sober facts, jedge, then you're wastin' the valeble time o' the two o' us," doggedly muttered the ruffian.

Instead of replying in words, Hugh Chadwick drew a little roll of bank-notes from his pocket, dropping them on the table in front of the astounded man, saying coldly:

"Count that boodle, Bart Clough. When you have done so, please tell me if the amount is correct."

"Thar's jest a even three hundred, jedge!" came the glad report, after a swift inspection. "Then you do—"

"Now tell me why you let Ethelbert Lawrence escape you?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

SOMETHING MORE THAN A HINT.

HUGH CHADWICK emphasized each slowly spoken word by tapping the table with his

clinchd hand, his eyes keenly fixed on that amazed face as though he meant to penetrate all disguise, and learn the whole truth even before that tongue could make confession.

If Bart Clough was not bewildered, he played his part to perfection. His face was the mirror of stupid perplexity, but that did not prevent his hands from gathering up those bills and stowing them away in a snug hiding-place.

"I kin hear what ye say, jedge, but ef I know what ye mean, hope may die!" he spluttered, at length.

"Keep your seat, Bart Clough," nodded Chadwick, resuming his customary manner, and seating himself on the opposite side of the table. "I haven't paid you for lying, but I may, if you keep it up. And that payment won't buy you nearly so many solid drunks as the bills you've just stowed away!"

"Ef you mistake the solid truth fer a pack o' lies, jedge, what kin I do?" hesitated the ruffian.

"You can make a friend instead of an enemy, Bart Clough. You ought to have sense enough to choose rightly. I can make my blows count, if I have to, old man!"

"Don't I know it? An' ef I wanted to lie, would I come right whar your word weighs more'n a solid ton o' mine? Would I stick to a lie, even on the off-chance o' ketchin' a boodle like this, once you showed you was up to snuff? Wouldn't I 'a' skun out, las' night, ef I didn't know I was in the right of it all, jedge?"

"Unless you was a clear fool, you'd ought to have levanted, that's a fact," coldly nodded Chadwick. "Still, you didn't. And now I've paid you the full amount you played for, I demand a straight answer: how and why did you let Ethelbert Lawrence escape you, that time?"

"Ef any other man was to even let a hint drop that way, jedge, I'd fling the solid lie into his teeth, ef it cost him a new set. As it is, I'll say this, an' say it loud: Ethelbert Lawrence didn't git away from me, an' I did lay him out cold, jest as I told you last night."

"And I say, you surely must have downed the wrong man, unless you are making it out of whole cloth!" just as positively declared Chadwick. "To prove it: you say you laid him out on the 7th. On the 20th of that same month, Ethelbert Lawrence was here in Gopher Slope, alive and able to talk, read and write."

"Ef he was, then 'twas his ghost."

"Ghosts are played out, Bart Clough. The man was here, in the flesh, and I can bring a score of good witnesses to prove as much, if necessary."

"Waal, that lays over my pile a bit, jedge, but I kin show up one witness, ef you'll take the trouble to go through Dead Man's Gulch to help onkiver him!" doggedly persisted the ruffian.

Hugh Chadwick pinched a lip between thumb and forefinger, pushing it inward to be nipped by those strong teeth. He gazed at the self-convicted assassin as though seeking to read his inmost thoughts. His own brain was working rapidly, though far too troubled to furnish a speedy solution to this ugly enigma.

He could hardly doubt longer that Bart Clough was perfectly sincere in sticking to his statement. Right or wrong, the ruffian really believed he had disposed of the right man. And yet—if so, who was the fellow who figured in Gopher Slope as Bouncer Bragg?

He was strongly tempted to throw away all caution, and trust this unscrupulous tool implicitly, but then came an inward warning: Bart Clough was very partial to whisky, and when under its genial influence, his tongue was apt to wag far too freely for a custodian of others' secrets. No, he dared not trust him, but need that doubt prevent his using him, as a tool?

"Well, Bart, I dare say you acted for what you deemed the best, and slugged that poor devil in perfect good faith. Still, it's a matter of public record that Ethelbert Lawrence was here in town, alive and unhurt, nearly two weeks after you did that job."

"I can't make it seem so, jedge, even at your backin'," doggedly persisted the villain. "I know what I know, an'—"

"Never mind running it all over again, Bart. Facts are facts, and one of them is that Lawrence, before a dozen responsible witnesses, sold the Neverfail to me, for cash down, and some of the best men in town stand ready to make oath they saw him sign the deeds."

"Will a dead man's signatoor stan' in law, jedge? Writ' after he was dead an' planted, I mean?"

"Drop that, I tell you!" with an ugly scowl. "Say much more on that point, and I'll begin to think you the one who's tried to set afloat all these damaging rumors concerning a cloud on the title of my mine."

"Hope may die, jedge, ef I even know what you're hintin' at."

"I'll make you wiser, after I've proved you square, Bart. Enough for now that such rumors have been started, just as I thought I'd sell out and try for a bit easier mode of living. And, for your own neck, old man, keep a mighty close lip about what happened on the 7th, in Dead Man's Gulch!"

"Never a soul knows it but you, jedge. My pard got wiped out, same time I ketched the

sickness that made sech a long wait atwixt pay-days. But I can't make out how it comes, fer all!"

"Don't waste time trying, then. I'll give you a hint, though. There is an agent sent here by the company my broker offered Neverfail to, and he has or will be making some risky inquiries. His employers seem to suspect evil has befallen Lawrence, and if they catch even an inkling of the truth—as you declare it—I wouldn't give a copper for your neck."

"Reckon I'd better skin out o' this, then?"

"Not until you've done the work I have in hand for you, old man. I've given you a good bit of earnest money, for I don't admit that you earned it. I'll give you as much more, if you carry out my plans."

"Kin I ax, fu'st, what them plans is, jedge?"

"Wait a bit. Did you pay close attention to the fellow who shot Shanghai Draper, to-day?"

"Waal, I see'd him, boss, but— No, cain't say as I did study him."

"He didn't remind you of any particular person, then?"

"No. Hed he ort?"

Hugh Chadwick hesitated for a brief space. He felt as though he would be placing himself, to a certain degree, in this rascal's power if he proceeded, yet—how could he pick a better tool?

"Do you remember Cyrus Whitfield, Bart?"

"That queer, soap-chawin' critter, jedge? The one who was al'ays makin' b'lieve he was on the stage, like?"

"That's the one I mean. You say you saw Bouncer Bragg, the fellow who shot Draper. Try and recall his face, figure, everything. Now—what do you really reckon, Bart?"

"But—he didn't war no baird, nur he wasn't nigh so old, nur yit— Shorely, boss, you don't reckon he's really Cy?"

"Either Cy Whitfield, or Ethelbert Lawrence!" positively declared Chadwick, scowling blackly. "If he is Whitfield, I can account for those nasty rumors, for I know he would risk a good deal to injure me, in body or in pocket. And so, Bart, to let you see just what grounds I'm going to work, take a squint at this bit of writing."

Chadwick tossed the slip of paper stolen from Nathan Knight across the table, and Clough gave a low, significant whistle as he read.

"Waal, jedge, that's a dig right whar you live, isn't it?" he asked, with a broad grin as he returned the paper. "So he *did* buy—"

"A lie!" sharply interrupted Chadwick, fiercely. "I can prove that I bought him out, by a score solid witnesses!"

"An' I've only got one—an' him nothin' solid-er'n bones, by this time!" said Clough, with a mock sigh of resignation. "Reckon I'll own up beat, boss. But—you hinted at some sort o' pay-in-work?"

"Yes. I've paid you for the work you promised, whether you performed it or not. If you are lying, I'll find it out in the end. If not—well, as long as I can pay you bigger wages than any other person will offer, you can afford to button up, particularly as idle chatter might very easily noose a rope about your own neck!"

"Don't mention it, jedge, even in a whisper!"

"All right; now for fresh business. I can't prove that this fellow who calls himself Bouncer Bragg, is either Whitfield or Lawrence. I've tried all I know, to make him unmask, without lugging in names. That would be too risky, of course."

"Still, I know that the fellow is here to make mischief, which may bring you into even worse trouble than it can bring on my shoulders. And so I say—he's got to lose his light, Bart Clough!"

"You saved it fer him, back yender, jedge!"

"I know, and I'm cursing myself for trying to win too much! Still, it's not too late, yet. I've made sure that agent don't get a chance to see the fellow before to-morrow, and by that time he'll be past all talking, if I can depend on you, old man!"

"You jest kin—fer cash down, boss!"

"I'll pay on the nail. Now, listen; you've not been gone so long as to become a stranger in Gopher Slope. You ought to be able to pick out a few good boys, who'll be glad to kick up a racket of this sort. You can pay them, of course, if you see fit, provided you keep my name out of sight."

"A few drinks o' whisky'll be all that's needed, jedge. But how 'bout Dave Arnold? I'd hate to hev to down him, too!"

"You'll not have to do that, never fear. Dave knows which side his bread is buttered on, and he'll give you mighty little trouble. I've convinced him that the prisoner will be safer in the stone jug, and he will take him there shortly after sundown. You know the place, Bart?"

"Waal, I reckon I'd orter," with a grin. "I've bin in thar, more times than I've got fingers an' toes, fer gittin' too loud, ye know!"

"I remember. Now, Bart, while I know that the boys have been slinging out some pretty sharp hints against Bouncer Bragg, I believe it is nothing more than empty wind. What's your opinion?"

"That they'll lynch him afore the moon comes up, jedge!"

Chadwick deliberately pulled a great roll of

bills from his breast pocket, counting out one after another until the pile amounted to an even five hundred dollars. Pushing this sum toward Clough, he said:

"It's not often that I permit myself to indulge in betting, of late days, old man, but whenever the notion *does* strike me, I back it up. I'll lay that amount, even-up, that there's no lynching this night!"

"Who's gwine to hold stakes ef I take ye up, jedge?"

"You can: who better? Dare you take my bet, Bart?"

"An' ef the Bouncer critter goes up a tree afore mornin', the wad's all mine, jedge?"

"Every cent of it! If he doesn't pull hemp, or die after some other fashion, before sunrise, of course you lose your bet!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

BART CLOUGH COMES TO TERMS.

THE two men sat gazing at each other across the table, the little heap of bank-notes lying between them.

The fingers of the lesser villain twitched as though itching to take possession, but, like one warned against undue haste by past experience, Bart Clough finally withdrew his hands altogether, leaning back clear of the table, the better to resist temptation.

"What's the matter with you?" Chadwick demanded, a scowl coming to his face, and a thinly veiled threat into his tones. "Haven't I given you all the show in the world?"

"Mebbe yes, an' mebbe no. Mebbe you're givin' me too mighty much show, an' mebbe the show hain't so much *show* as 'twill turn out circus, with Bart Clough as clown!"

"Don't be a fool, old man!"

"Right thar's whar I'm tryin' to *don't*, boss," with a slowly dawning grin. "Time was when you mought choke pritty nigh 'most anything down the thrapple o' ole Bart, an' he'd swaller it ef he tuck the bark off. But—waal, times is heap sight dif'rent sence this time yest'day, jedge, an' what'd be plenty *then*, hain't nigh 'nough *now*."

"Why, you infernal cormorant! For half that sum, I could get a dozen men to do ten times as much as I ask of you!"

"Tain't the money, so much, jedge," giving a faint, wistful sigh as his hungry eyes seemed irresistibly drawn toward the little stack of bills. "Ef I could j-st marry that wad to this 'ere boodle, reckon I'd feel so good an' grow so big folks'd hev to hitch a 'dition onto the Slope, to hev room fer the rest o' the citizens!"

"What's the matter, then? Do you think there's a string tied to it? Just you win, and you'll have yourself for a paymaster, man!"

"That part's all right, too, an' tain't me as 'll kick 'ginst holdin' stakes, ye want to know, jedge, but—ef ever I'm to do any more p'tick'lar work fer *you*, boss, thar mustn't be no room left fer findin' fault, like thar was last time!"

"Money talks, don't it, you grumbler?"

"That's what I used to 'low, jedge, but it don't even whisper, now. I've hed too much an' a-plenty o' that 'long o' the E. L. job."

"You've got your pay in advance, man; what more can you want?"

"Straight business, jedge, an' a let-up on foolishness. *That's* what I want, an' that's jest what I'll hev, or you 'nd me don't do no more dealin's that hain't meant fer the bright sun to shine down on. So—rake down your dingbats, jedge, or else come to Limerick! Spit out jest the sort o' work you want done, an' then I'll talk business with ye."

Hugh Chadwick did not give an immediate answer, though he knew enough of his present companion to feel sure this was an ultimatum. Dearly though Bart Clough loved money, not so much for its own sake, as for the bestial enjoyments it might provide, even that large sum could not shake the resolution he had taken so suddenly.

He swiftly reflected, but he decided that he dared not take such a risky tool fully into his confidence, even though they might be bound together by deeds of blackest guilt. Still, might he not satisfy the obstinate rascal by telling only part of the truth?

"You may be spoiling a future market for your talents, Bart, by this show of mulishness, but since you will have it that way—all right!"

"This is really part of the E. L. job, and though I've paid you in full for *that*, I'm offering you just as much more, to clean up. Now—if Bouncer Bragg passes out of sight this night—"

"Stiddy, jedge!" and Bart Clough flung out a hand as an additional check. "Does that mean git lynched?"

"It means *death*, of course, you carping crank!" with a black scowl at the knave who seemed to take delight in chafing him. "It means that I'll pay you this big sum of cash, on condition that the fellow who calls himself Bouncer Bragg, does not live through this night. Is that plain enough lingo for you, Bart Clough?"

"I reckon it 'll be a turrible tough job,

jedge," muttered the ruffian, one hand stealing forward far enough to feel the texture of the top bill, but without actually taking possession of the money.

"And I pay a 'turrible' long price for bringin' it off, don't I? If it were a mere trifle, would I offer a year's wages for an hour's work?"

"An' the boys *do* say, that they reckon ef trouble was to bu'st out, this night, Gallus Fred 'll be one of the keenest snags in the way!"

"I can hardly think he'll chip, but he needn't know anything about the trick until after it's safely turned. And he's too thoroughbred a gambler to ask for a sight, then."

"You really reckon, jedge?"

"I know," came the emphatic response. "You can surprise Dave Arnold, easily enough, and then run the Bouncer out of town before another soul can be one whit the wiser."

"Ef I could on'y see it plain's you 'pear to, jedge!"

"Rub your eyes clear of dust and gum, old man! Why, it's a dead open-and-shut, man! I'd guarantee to run the fellow off, and never a soul in all Gopher Slope be any the wiser for it!"

"Yit you're ready to pay a mighty snug pile fer 'nother hand to do the engineerin'! Times must be turrible flush with you, jedge!"

"I can better afford to pay the money than have too many eyes turning this way, Bart. If this fellow is the one I more than half-believe, he's the owner of the hand that's been stirring up mischief about the Neverfail. How can I be sure he hasn't already given a wink to the company's agent? If so, and I couldn't prove a sound *alibi* for all the time that trick was being turned, how much better off would I be? Worse, man!"

"Mebbe thar is somethin' in that, jedge!"

"There's everything in it, man! And 'ef I am right in my suspicions, it's almost as much for your interest as mine, to get the Bouncer out of sight, sound and smelling!"

"You shorely don't reckon he's E. L., do ye, boss?"

"Not now, though I did have my doubts that way, first-off. But since you declare so positively that you didn't make a mistake, that time—"

"I kin take my davy E. L. never come back to the Slope, jedge!"

"Well, if not E. L., then this fellow can be none other than Cyrus Whitfield, who—"

"Waal, waal, I want to be dug-gun! Pack me down in castor-ile fer a sardine! Ef I ever—*he did* look right smart like—"

"Button your lip, man!" fiercely hissed Chadwick, turning pale as a head man, but with eyes fairly blazing. "Not another word on that point, or I'll slug you, for keeps!"

"Button goes, jedge, an' I didn't say nothin', nur yit even *think* the same," hastily yielded the knave, shrinking back in his seat.

"All right, old man. You and I can't afford to quarrel, just at the present stage of affairs. Now—will you take that pile, and do the work it calls for?"

"I reckon I'd better, boss," yielded the assassin, though his hands showed less eagerness in taking possession of that sum, than they had of the earlier payment. "An' yit—fer the life o' me, I can't see jest how the pesky critter kin do any harm!"

"And I'm not paying you for doing any more guesswork along that vein, either, old man," bluntly retorted Chadwick. "It's quite enough that I'm paying good money to guard against the bare possibility of his being able to cause trouble, not only for me, but for you, as well!"

"Turrible 'bliged to ye, jedge! Mebbe I kin do as much fer you, one o' these 'long-come-shortlies. But—ef Dave should hev a *posse*, an' we couldn't git the under-holt 'thout tha'r kickin' up a row?"

"There's little risk on that score, but if he should be such a fool as to kick, *push it through!* I'm paying you to make a clean job, Bart, and if the Bouncer lives to see the next sun rise, I'll hunt you to a six-foot hole, and make dead-sure the plantin' is final!"

"But that's chawin' wind for nothing. If you set to work right, you can pick up your gang, and manage it so that Dave can't have even the show of an excuse for fighting. He'll not make a row unless he simply *has* to, for his own credit, you understand?"

"What's to hinder you jest slippin' a slick hint his way, boss?"

"I've seen him, and he feels that, if only for the sake of his wife and kids, he has no right to foolishly invite a double hanging. And, too, I'm pretty sure you can catch the drop on him easy enough. He said he hadn't slept a wink for three nights!"

"Good Lawd!" snorted Bart, joining freely in the low chuckle with which Hugh Chadwick pointed that assertion. "Ef he *has* to hev a *posse*, an' could pick out some more critters in that same perdick, what a holy picnic we lads would hev!"

"Then, you will do the job, old man? I can depend on you, dead sure?"

"I'll do the job, ef it lays in the wood, jedge," deliberately affirmed the ruffian, rising to his

feet, those bank-notes safely stowed away in his bosom. "An' ef I can't do it, then no other one man need make a try!"

"See that you don't make a failure of it, Bart. That's all I ask for, but I *do* ask and expect that much," earnestly added the judge, as he followed his unscrupulous tool from the room to the front door.

"All right, boss. I'll do it quiet, ef I kin, but—I'll do it!"

"I expect that much. Keep in the background as much as possible, though I hardly think there'll be much if any trouble over the job, once it is fairly over."

"That's all right, jedge. 'Twon't be so turrible hard, I don't reckon, to set the critters a-movin', an' then it'll do itself, with a odd yank at the wires, off an' on. So—sleep happy, boss!"

Bart Clough swaggered away down-town, head up and hat cocked over one eye, "steppin' high," as though of lordly lineage. Possibly he might have felt his oats less, had he caught sight of that dark, fierce scowl with which Hugh Chadwick watched his going, from the shadow of his half-closed door.

"Needn't wink at yer Uncle Fuller, critters!" muttered the ruffian, as he shook his head at the gaudy letters on each drinking-saloon as he kept on his way, like one who has a particular destination in view. "Ef I didn't hev a red in my kicks, I'd hev to fight turrible hard ag'inst temptation, but with so many ducats, it's—go 'way whisky!"

Bart Clough quickened his pace somewhat as he came in sight of the shanty where Hugh Chadwick had found him, a couple of hours earlier in the day: the same to which Shanghai Draper had been removed.

Whether by chance or through intention, Clough came upon the shanty from one side, and instead of passing directly around to the front, where the door was open for ventilation, he paused for a glance through the little window in that side.

Shanghai Draper was lying on his cot, still in a drugged stupor. His nurse was absorbed in poker, and his opponent was none other than Solemn Saul Sunday!

Bart Clough took but a single glance, then stooped and crept noiselessly away, his face wrinkling with a dark, anxious frown.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ODD WORK FOR AN INVALID.

AFTER watching Bart Clough out of sight, Hugh Chadwick returned to his room, locking the door behind him to guard against a possible intrusion on the part of the housekeeper.

Unlocking the desk in which he kept his business papers, he drew forth a number of documents, and spreading them on the table, began carefully preparing each signature, each word, almost, with the written slip which he had obtained so unexpectedly from Nathan Knight.

More than once he seemed on the verge of an important discovery, which would serve to clear away all ugly doubts, even if that discovery should serve to confirm his worst fears. But, just as often, the looked-for clew would fade away, leaving all as before.

When his smarting eyeballs warned him that he was overdoing the matter, Hugh Chadwick would drop the papers, to lean back in his chair with closed lids, thinking—thinking—his brain ever busy with the past or the present.

"It can't be Lawrence!" were a few of the words which seemed to ring through his brain, far more loudly than if his tongue had actually shaped the syllables. "Bart couldn't lie me down, like that! And if he hadn't made sure work of it, wouldn't he come back before? Would he wait this long, and then come in disguise? Wouldn't he act truer to his old impetuosity, and come at me with a gun in his fist?"

Once more he fell to studying those written words, comparing them with writing executed by an altogether different hand. And once more he failed to solve the enigma to his satisfaction.

"Yet, don't I *know* one or the other of them must have written this poisonous note? If not Lawrence, then—Whitfield! Don't I know how cunning he was with the pen? He could write a different hand for each day in the month! Just as he could play a dozen different parts, all true to the life, in as many minutes!"

"It must be he! And yet—how did he come to life again? How could he get out, even if the fall didn't— If I only knew for sure! If I could only—*why not?*"

Hugh Chadwick gave a violent start, flashing a glance around, just as though those words had come from another's throat, instead of simply flashing across his excited brain.

"Bah!" forcing a husky laugh, then rising and pouring himself out a full glass of whisky. I've been racking my brain until I'm nearly sick. And—*why not?*"

Once more that question, but this time Hugh Chadwick put it to himself, deliberately, with clearing reason.

He swallowed the liquor, then sat down, thinking steadily while methodically arranging

the scattered documents. When these were in order, he replaced them in his desk, locked it, pocketed the key, put on his hat and left the house.

He spent some little time in town, meeting and conversing with several of his friends. While the conversation was mainly of the shooting which had occurred, to each man Chadwick had something to say about his own injury: his head was hurting him, and he began to feel quite feverish.

At last he staggered, dizzily, and accepted a friendly arm to his home. He spoke lightly of his foolish yielding to such a trifle, but finally acceded to his friend's wish that he would see the doctor.

When the medical man arrived, he found the judge in bed, breathing rapidly, looking flushed and far from well. The scalp-wound appeared to be inflamed, and after dressing it more scientifically, the doctor cautioned Chadwick to keep his bed and avoid all excitement.

"It's only a trifle, relatively speaking, judge, but unless you use common sense, it may lay you up—if it don't lay you out!"

Chadwick promised to obey, and Polly Maydew said that she would see he had no chance of flying in the face of his physician's orders.

The judge meekly accepted the soothing draught Polly concocted for him, after the doctor took his departure to visit Shanghai Draper, and then, vowing that he felt like sleeping, he bade Mrs. Maydew leave him to himself, and on no account to break his slumbers. If he wanted anything more that evening or night, he would summon her.

For nearly an hour Hugh Chadwick lay without stir or motion, seeming soundly slumbering. He made no sign when, just at dusk, Polly Maydew cautiously opened his door to steal a look into the chamber. But then, after her slippered footfalls died away in the distance, the judge slipped out of bed and cautiously turned the key in its lock, hanging a towel over the door-knob.

He quickly donned his clothes; not his "Sunday suit," however, but rough garments which he wore when busied at his mine, the Neverfail. No one seeing him move, just then, would have set him down as an invalid.

Having dressed himself, the judge opened a closet, fumbling about its shelves in the gloom, choosing to be guided by the sense of touch rather than run the risk of striking a light, by which the unwished for curiosity of Polly Maydew might be awakened.

From those shelves he brought forth several articles, laying them on the foot of the bed until ready to make his final move. Then, carefully raising his window and propping it in place, Chadwick used one of those articles: a coil of slender but strong rope, to lower a pair of rubber knee-boots to the ground outside. He secured a dark-lantern on his person, then, passing the doubled rope around the foot of his bed, he dropped both ends out at the window, quickly following with his feet, grasping the knotted rope firmly as he trusted his weight upon it.

Once safely on the ground, and hearing no sounds to arouse his suspicions that his odd actions were noted, the judge drew down the rope, coiling it up and slinging it over one shoulder. Drawing on the pair of gum boots, he crouched low down, to blend his person with the earth as much as possible, stealing silently away from his house, more like a retreating burglar than a highly reputable invalid.

The building was entirely dark, as he paused to look back. He knew that Polly Maydew was "an early bird," both to rise and to retire, and as he had given her such positive commands not to disturb his sleep, he had little fears of her making any dangerous discovery.

"By the time I can get back, she'll be sleeping like a log, and I can enter in front, without her ever being any the wiser. Then—if Bart Clough does his work as he can do it, who'll have the creek to even look cross-ways in my direction?"

Hugh Chadwick gave a little chuckle, barely above his breath, as he mentally shaped that question, then turned his face toward the distant hills, striding onward with very healthy vigor.

His pace slackened somewhat, however, as he drew near to the destination he had in mind. If the moon had arisen, or if the stars had been able to cast a light under that slouched hat, they might have revealed a face that was very pale, and far from being that of a man bound on a pleasure-trip.

In sober truth, Hugh Chadwick had prepared that coil of knotted rope for just such an excursion, nearly six months before this night. A dozen times since its preparation he had tried to carry out the idea which had caused its shaping, only to delay, to postpone, until now.

"I'd rather fight six stout men, hand to hand, than face—that!" he muttered, pushing back his hat to brush a hand across his damp brows which, wet though they were, felt cold to his touch. "I wouldn't, only—curse the fellow!" with sudden ferocity, turning toward the distant town and shaking a clinched fist. "Why couldn't he stay dead? What made him turn up just now, of all times? Kill him, Bart! Kill him, I say, or—I'll kill you!"

That savage outburst seemed to do him no little good, for from that minute until the end, Hugh Chadwick worked rapidly, without cutting time to waste.

He came to a considerable mound of clay, stones and other worthless debris, which marked an abandoned shaft, into which hole far more money had been cast than was ever taken out again. And, after a brief search in the vicinity, he found a log which proved fully capable of the use to which he intended putting it.

Securely knotting one end of the rope around the middle of this timber, after satisfying himself that it was still sound enough to uphold thrice his own weight, Hugh Chadwick placed it across the mouth of the deserted shaft.

Tying a heavy stone to the other end of the rope, he knelt at the mouth of the pit; lowering the weight, and pausing from time to time to give the rope a gentle swing from side to side in order to make sure the shaft was not choked up enough to render a descent too risky to life, the judge gave a long breath of satisfaction as he felt the stone strike bottom, leaving still several yards of slack in his hands.

"Still, it's plenty deep enough to hold even such an ugly secret!" he muttered, giving a nervous start as he found he had spoken aloud.

Dropping the slack and crouching low along the earth, nearly hidden by the coarse weeds, which had struggled into existence there, Hugh Chadwick flashed a swift glance around, then supplemented it with a slow, thorough scrutiny.

Nothing like human life was to be detected, and reassured on that point, the judge fell to work once more. He removed several loose stones from the edge of the opening, and after a touch to make sure sure his dark lantern was securely fastened, safe from a fall, he grasped the rope with both hands, cautiously lowering himself from that stout timber, until his weight hung suspended from his arms. Twisting his legs about the rope, making good use of the frequent knots, Hugh Chadwick slowly lowered himself into that dark, foul-smelling abyss.

Once started, he was not a man to hesitate, though cold drops stood on his face until their weight carried them, like tears, down to fall upon—what?

The bare thought sent a shiver through his athletic frame, but it was too late now for backing out. He must learn the whole truth, horrible though reason told him that truth must be.

As his feet touched the bottom, Hugh Chadwick involuntarily jerked them upward, shivering afresh. For a score seconds he could not lower them. And, had the situation above been one whit less critical, he might even then have beaten a retreat, leaving those haunting doubts still unsolved.

It was one of the boldest acts of his life, when the judge finally forced himself to not only touch the bottom again, but release that rope, to unsling his lantern and strike a match for lighting it.

He longed to look downward and around him, but he forced himself to stare only at that tiny light, at the flame which sprang up in his lantern, at anything else but precisely what he had come there to see.

His first glance was cast downward, and he gave a long breath as he saw only ordinary debris at his feet. He gathered his nerves together, then turned the bright light slowly around, to pause with a low cry as his staring eyes caught sight of—Before he could be sure, there came a sudden rushing sound, a heavy blow, and he fell like one dead.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MARSHAL AND HIS CHARGE.

FOR some little time after Hugh Chadwick took his departure, the sweet singer of Blissful Buttes was left to himself and his thoughts, which could hardly have been the most cheerful company imaginable.

But then, with a preliminary rap by way of introduction, David Arnold turned the key and opened the door, to pass through and lock himself in with his charge.

"Delighted to see you, gentle marshal!" almost fervently cried the Boomer, extending both hands. "Truly must I have found birth under a lucky star, for—I thought 'twas that singularly obscure magistrate, come back for another whirl at the unknowable."

"Well, I reckon he meant it all for your own good, Mr. Bragg," said Arnold, taken a little aback by this totally unexpected warmth.

"Exactly! Just as we were told that the semi-daily dose of sulphur and molasses was for physical benefit, in childhood's golden hours. Just as our youthful guardians would religiously taboo whatever our hearts cherished, to press upon us those things which we constitutionally abhorred. And just so—but, I say, gentle stranger, can't I sell you a ticket of admission to Blissful Buttes? If you only—"

"I'm afraid you'll never have a chance to spend the commission on what sales you've already made, Mr. Bragg," seriously spoke up the city marshal, checking that volatile flow with an emphatic gesture. "Instead of talking

crazy rot like that, I reckon you'd better be trying to meet what's almost sure to come."

"A Daniel come to judgment? Or, is it simply an oracle, giving utterance to the words some outsider has breathed through the hole in its back?"

"Cracking jokes is all right, if you only think so, Bragg, but I'm afraid you're in a mighty bad box! And it's like to grow worse before it gets any better!"

Arnold spoke in gloomy tones, and, to do him simple justice, he felt pretty much the same way. While not exactly a model officer, any more than he was a perfect man, up to date he had performed his duty with at least an attempt at impartiality. If he had failed, that was more his misfortune than his fault. But now—deep down in his heart, he came very near cursing Hugh Chadwick!

With all his lightness of bearing, real or assumed the more perfectly to suit the character of Bouncer Bragg, his prisoner could not avoid being in some measure affected by those gloomy looks, and foreboding hints.

"You surely don't reckon my life is in peril, marshal?"

"I wish I could say I didn't."

"Nonsense, man, dear! Gopher Slope may be a tough place, but the majority of her citizens are of Caucasian descent, and the white man never drew breath who'd shut off another's wind simply because he broke skin on a foul cur who was trying to worry a lady!"

"If it really did happen that way, you see, stranger, but—"

"For 'if,' read 'did,' and there you have it, gentle sir."

"But, Shanghai Draper makes oath he was just trying to save the young lady from being struck by a rattler."

"Of course! And if he could talk, a sheep-killing cur would make affidavit that the shreds of wool found between his teeth, he had laboriously gathered, thread by thread, from the thorny hedges which had done the damage, expressly to mend the torn fleeces on the backs of said sheep. See the point?"

David Arnold shook his head, dubiously, as well he might. That glib tongue resembled a torrent in one respect: you could drink in the general rush and roar, but you couldn't well pick out each note.

"Maybe you're right—or thought you was right, stranger. But there's a mighty sight of difference between the two points! Anyway they say Draper is mighty bad off, and as he's got a right smart sprinkling of friends in town, things begin to look blue—I tell ye!"

"Well, you furnish the reel, and I'll try to look white enough to complete the national colors, dear fellow," laughingly retorted Bouncer Bragg, casting aside even that shadow of seriousness. "Of course, in case the not-to-be-lamented Shanghai's friends should kick up a bobbery, you would stand 'em off?"

"Well, trying and doing is hardly the same thing," hesitated the marshal, longing to get at the point which had induced him to call, yet kept in semi-confusion by this odd genius. "If you hadn't shut the judge off so mighty short, he might—"

"I don't doubt it, in the least, dear marshal. In fact, he tried to do me, all he knew, until I did shut him off. Did he send you in to complete the pumping process, Mr. Arnold?"

"Who, me? The judge? He never said a word to me about pumping you, Bragg, but—come to think—Cy Whitfield never used to wear a full beard!"

"Which means—just what?"

"I reckon you could give a better explanation than any one else, Whitfield," nodded the marshal, all the time closely watching that face in hopes of having his belief justified. "You used to be mighty thick with the judge, Cyrus, and why you can't trust him now that you're in a hobble, passes me!"

"All of which, boiled down, amounts to just this: you think I am a fellow by the name of Cyrus Whitfield?"

"Which you surely *are*, too!"

"Which I most assuredly *am not*! I never was, never will be, a Cyrus! I am a Bouncer, and as a Bouncer I'll do or die! As a Bouncer I've made my mark throughout nine States and three Territories, truthfully singing the unex-ampled glories of that paradise, Blissful Buttes! The land where honey flows more freely than water, and where—hold on, my dear and revered stranger! Don't tear yourself away until I've sold you a chance in— Good-by, if you call that gone!"

The door slammed emphatically behind the marshal, and Bouncer Bragg heard the key grate as it turned in the wards.

Left alone, his counterfeit gayety vanished, and sinking down on the edge of the cot-bed with which the room was supplied, he fell into a deep, gloomy reverie, sitting there without a sound or motion, chin on hands, and elbows supported by his knees.

With all his seeming recklessness, Bouncer Bragg was in no haste to shuffle off this mortal coil. Life was fully as dear to him as to any ordinary mortal. He knew, too, that evil powers were at work against his life; after that

visit paid by Hugh Chadwick, how could he doubt?

And yet, what had he done? Saved a lady from the grip of a drunken brute who might well have wrought irreparable injury, only for his timely interference. And that lady was—

"Does she know? Did she catch what I let fall, when I sprung to infold her in my arms? Could she even— Drop that, Bouncer Bragg!" he broke off, lifting his head with an almost defiant toss.

Only to resume his brooding attitude, unheeding the flight of time, giving never a thought to all the mischief which might be hatching on the outside of his prison. And he was still in that position when, the day almost spent, David Arnold once more gave a warning rap at his door, before inserting the key in its lock.

"Come in if you're good-looking!" called out the prisoner, once more the cool, dare-devil Bouncer Bragg. "I'd open the door, but I've lost my key, and— Come back to buy a ticket, dear fellow?"

"No time for fool' chatter, Bragg!" sharply reproved the marshal, his face paler than ordinary, his voice betraying considerable agitation. "If you can't wake up and be sensible, you're a gone goose!"

"I want to know! Then the toughs are plucking up courage as the sun goes down?"

"There's ugly talk going on in town, for a fact, stranger! I haven't dared leave the house, of course, but a friend brings word that Shanghai Draper is about to crack! If he does— Well, it's bound to make a mighty nasty row, for sure!"

"I surrendered to you, marshal, in good faith. When I gave up my guns to you, of course I expected that you would see I came to no bodily harm, at least until an investigation could take place."

"I know. I almost wish I hadn't run you in!"

"All of which means just this: you'll hardly break your back trying to hold the door against a gang, should it come for me?"

Dave Arnold flushed hotly, and his tall form drew up, almost proudly, as he said:

"I've never lost a man yet, Mr. Bragg, and I'm too old at the business to make a beginning now! And if you'll listen to reason, and follow orders, I'll bring you safely through this scrape, too!"

"May I ask a little further light, dear marshal?"

"Here's the idea, then. We have a strong stone jail, but I didn't like to take you there, if I could help it, you being a gentleman, sir. But now—the only show I see of keeping you out of the mob's grip, is to put you in the jug, then bluff off the gang until the better part of Gopher Slope can be rallied to your defense. See?"

"I hear," nodded Bouncer Bragg, with a glance toward the pocket of the marshal. "If I promise to go with you quietly, why bring handcuffs?"

"So those who may chance to sight us, won't give the yell that I'm trying to run you out of town, to give you leg-bail," came the prompt explanation. "Will you do this, or shall I call in help, Mr. Bragg?"

After a brief hesitation, during which his brain was very active, Bouncer Bragg held out his hands, and Arnold quickly snapped a pair of strong cuffs about his wrists.

"Just to give you a chance to play white, marshal," the prisoner said, coolly. "If this is a trick to make sure work of an unarmed man, so much the worse for you when my executors call for reasons and an explanation. You *sabe*, senor?"

"I know that I'm doing my level best to save your neck from the rope, sir," sharply retorted Arnold, flinging the door open and leading his charge toward the front door, where he was joined by a couple of rough-clad, sturdy-looking fellows, who fell in at the rear as the house was left behind them.

The sun had set, and already the dusk was beginning to deepen into night, rendering it comparatively easy for Arnold to hide the fact of his companion being in irons, as they hastened through the streets, making for the stout stone jail, which stood near the western edge of town.

This proved to be one of those curious "jugs" so nearly confined to the Southern States; without door or window below, and which are only to be entered after climbing an outside stairway. Once up this, a trap-door was lifted in the flat roof, laying bare a rude sort of elevator, by means of which prisoners, and their rations as well, were lowered to the bottom, there to be dumped off, unceremoniously, to admit of the platform being hoisted out of reach.

Into this dark, ill-smelling vault the ironed prisoner was lowered, and when the "lift" rose again, one of the guards grimly muttered:

"Fire can't faze him, an' ef they try to batter down the wall, boss, the racket ought to fetch the hull town to help us out—ain't it?"

CHAPTER XXX.

SOLEMN SAUL'S STREAK OF LUCK.

THE Sad Man from San Saba put in a full day's work, if it was the Sabbath, and though he did not have so very much to show for his ex-

ertions when the sun went down, pecuniarily speaking, his brain-pan was the register of a few more points, and he counted his time far from wasted.

He had quit that game of poker about even, so far as dollars were concerned, but while entertaining the fellow hired to nurse Shanghai Draper through his "sickness," Sunday had a chance to hear many a stray word or sentence, which went far to convince him that Gopher Slope was tolerably sure to experience a lively "shaking up" before another sun could come around from the East.

It would be tedious for the reader to follow the Sad Man through all his twistings and turnings, that day, though the man himself found plenty to keep him from growing weary.

As the day grew older, Solemn Saul became more confident that hidden influences were at work against Bouncer Bragg; for Shanghai Draper was hardly worth so much excitement and ugly talk, even among those with whom he might be rightly classed.

"That hain't tha'r manner o' doin' a job," Saul told himself, while ciphering out the interesting problem. "With sech as *them*, it's a rush an' a whooray, or a fall back an' quit fer good. But *now*—a heap sight bigger hand's doin' the stirrin' up, from onder kiver, an' I'm offerin' big dollars to weenty dimes that I kin name the man as owns that fist, too."

Right or wrong, Solemn Saul decided that Hugh Chadwick lay back of it all, though, as yet, he was unable to give more than a bare guess as to why he should seek the death of the man who had, in all probability, assisted in saving him from death at the pistol of a wronged and desperate man. And so, acting on this belief, he resolved to keep at least one eye on the future movements of that uncertain gentleman.

Still, he did not entirely neglect Bouncer Bragg, small cause though he had for loving that human enigma after his recent experience with the glib Boomer. But, finding Fred Galloway also on the alert, he contented himself with dropping a few hints as to the ugly talk he had picked up, leaving the little sport to do the rest.

"Ef the jedge is at the bottom of it all, he'll try fer a talk out o' giner'l hearin', afore he gits down to killin'," decided the detective, as he left the Pluribus Hotel without being observed, in the same disguise he had assumed for the purpose of interviewing Nathan Knight. "Ef so, I want to be on hand! Sufferin' Jerusha Jane! Wouldn't it be a mighty streak o' luck, though?"

Among other points of information which he had that day picked up, one came from a few words let drop by the doctor, as he paid a visit to the wounded Shanghai, who had roused up sufficiently to ask that Hugh Chadwick might be brought to see him.

"Would, but can't, my dear fellow," came the reply. "He's flat on his back, from that crease, and if he's able to venture out to-morrow, I think he'll be in great good luck!"

Despite that assertion, Solemn Saul took his station at a point from whence he could command a fair view of the house and grounds, settling himself down for a tedious spell of waiting and watching.

"Needn't try to tell me tha'r'll be a lynchin', 'thout he hes a finger in t e puddin'! Dave Arnold is the marshal. An' Dave sneezes when the jedge takes snuff! Ef the jedge hain't into it, then Dave 'll kick up a racket plenty loud fer all Gopher Slope to hear, jest as the runty sport hinted he'd better. So—I'm sot!"

As already shown, this was fairly good reasoning, based on what he had learned by playing eavesdropper the night before; but Solemn Saul had no method of even guessing what changes had taken place since that hour, else his actions might have been different, and much of what remains to record, might never have taken place.

"Didn't I tell ye so?" softly chuckled the detective, as his keen eyes caught sight of that dark shape slowly descending from the side-window. "The jedge, fer ducats!"

Although taken a bit aback by the fact that Hugh Chadwick—as he never once doubted that dark figure really was—stole away from town, instead of toward it, Solemn Saul clung to his original resolve, and dogged that skulking shadow without once fairly losing sight of it, up to the time of its reaching the deserted shaft.

Crouching low behind and beneath a scrubby bush, the detective was able to pretty accurately follow each movement made by the judge, even though he vainly racked his brain to divine just what object was to be gained by such curious proceedings.

This was his first visit to that immediate vicinity, but he found scant difficulty in reaching a correct conclusion, so far as the nature of that artificial mound was concerned.

"A old shaft, easy 'nough," he muttered, while closely watching the actions of his game. "But what's the pesky critter got down thar, that he takes so much— *The devil!*"

One hand clapped over his own lips, too late to entirely smother that ejaculation. He saw Chadwick give a start, then drop out of sight, but he knew better than to stir a limb, even though it

might well be that the judge was even then drawing a bead on his frail shelter.

"Shoot dead center, or I'll down ye!" he mentally vowed, his blood tingling sharply through his veins, not alone because of the peril which might be menacing him, however. "Down ye, an' then—I'll see what manner o' *treasure* you've got hid into that hole, my covey!"

But, as already recorded, Hugh Chadwick fancied himself free from observation, and then resumed his preparations for a descent into that gruesome shaft.

Thanks to that slight elevation, which brought the judge into relief against a notch in the hills, Saul Sunday could tell just when that descent began, and after waiting a few moments, straining his ears to detect any signs of a return, he left his cover and stole silently up the little mound, pausing at brief intervals to listen. And then, close enough to see the strain taken off the rope, Solemn Saul moved still nearer the edge of the shaft, holding a hastily gathered bunch of weeds in front of his face, to guard against his head being seen in case Hugh Chadwick should cast a glance upward.

He was just in time to see the judge light his lantern, and he breathlessly waited to see what would be his next move. That was to slowly, even reluctantly, shift his lantern to cast its yellow light around, and as Solemn Saul gazed, he saw that this was something more than a mere shaft: that on one side there was—

The rock on which the detective had been leaning with his free hand, suddenly gave way, and it was only by swiftly grasping at the timber which crossed the opening, that he saved himself from falling headlong down the shaft!

As it was—the rock?

Feeling sick and dizzy, Solemn Saul shrunk back, trying to check his wildly thumping heart, lest it hinder his hearing—not a sound came upward from that black pit!

Had that fallen rock killed Hugh Chadwick, or was he crouching there with a gun in readiness to send a bullet through the first head that dared to show itself?

Another minute of suspenseful waiting, then Sunday tossed several small stones into the pit, hearing them rattle from side to side, but without bringing sound or movement from that desperate man.

He took off his hat and cautiously moved it over the edge, held in a natural position by the bunch of weeds which he crammed into it. But no shot came, nothing to tell him that life was at the bottom!

Then, risking a shot in his anxiety to know just what he had to expect, Solemn Saul swiftly leaned forward and flashed a glance down the shaft: to see the lantern still burning, and its yellow fan falling squarely upon the bloodstained face of Hugh Chadwick as he lay in an awkward heap on that mass of debris!

"Knocked out, by thunder!" exploded the detective, no longer hesitating, but grasping the rope and rapidly lowering himself to the bottom, where that ghastly object lay without sense or motion.

His first impulse was to ascertain just how fatal that unforeseen accident had been, and with the light in one hand, with his other he felt of that torn scalp, giving a long breath of relief as he made sure the stone had not struck fairly.

"If it *had*, he'd never be able to tell his head from a mess of hash!" was the grim comment, as his fingers failed to detect any signs of break or fracture. "His cabeza's sound, and his blood-pump hain't struck work! He'll have to borrow a bigger hat, but—business, old man!"

With his worst fears set at rest, Solemn Saul felt his professional instincts awaken, and, flashing the light around, he saw that he had not been mistaken; a drift had been run for some little distance from the shaft proper, and doubtless in that direction lay the "treasure" for which Hugh Chadwick took this night tramp.

"He might wake up too soon, so—with your leave, judge!" muttered Sunday, hastily knotting a handkerchief about those dulled eyes.

This precaution taken, Solemn Saul picked up the lantern and moved slowly forward, keenly scanning each foot of the ragged walls as he did so. But not for long; less than twenty paces from the spot where Hugh Chadwick lay insensible, the drift came to an end. And there the yellow light fell upon a grim and gruesome spectacle!

A skeleton—a mummy, rather!

With a low cry, Saul Sunday sprang forward, bending over that awful thing, trying in vain to trace some resemblance to the missing Ethelbert Lawrence. In vain, for while no bones were visible, the flesh had shrunk and dried to parchment, one might almost call it, changing the face so horribly that even a mother could not have recognized a favorite son in that awful relic of humanity.

But Solemn Saul did not examine that withered face for long. He saw an object still clasped by those shriveled fingers, and with a second ejaculation, he slipped it free. It was a leather-bound note-book, still in a fair state of preservation. Those fingers had kept the covers closed, and though they stuck together a little, Solemn Saul managed to part them, near the

middle of the book. To catch his breath sharply as his eager eyes read a few of the words written there in lead pencil.

"What a streak of luck!" he whispered softly, to himself, as he closed the book and slipped it into his breast pocket, without daring to spend time in reading all there penciled.

A faint groan from Hugh Chadwick warned him to make haste, unless he wished to be discovered, and only pausing to make sure that the judge had not yet recovered his senses, he removed that bandage, grasped the rope and quickly climbed up out of the shaft, there to repeat the words:

"Good boy, Saul! What a glorious streak of luck is this!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE JUDGE INSPECTS HIS WORK.

THAT knotted rope had hardly ceased its oscillations, caused by the hurried ascent of the disguised detective, before Hugh Chadwick gave still more positive signs of rallying from that severe shock.

His moan became a husky groan, and his lids lifted far enough to let that yellow light fall upon the eyes, blinding rather than aiding reviving sight.

He shivered and shrank back a bit, much as a physically helpless person might shrink from a cruel blow. His injured head touched a bit of rock, causing a tingling pain, which did more than aught else to bring back a memory of what had befallen him.

"Don't—don't hit me!" he huskily gasped, flinging up a hand as if to ward off another blow.

That hand struck the dangling rope, and still another link was joined to waking memory.

Little by little Hugh Chadwick came to himself, and as he stared about his unpleasant quarters by the light of his lantern, he noticed the rock which had caused his sudden prostration. There were blood-marks upon it, and as he looked closer, he detected a few hairs, almost surely robbed from his own scalp.

"That's the way of it, I reckon," he muttered, to himself, not a little relieved to have his first superstitious doubts so readily set at rest. "I thought I threw away or dropped down all loose stones, but—better such a crack, than from a living witness!"

Though able to reason fairly well, the judge was feeling far from his customary self. His head throbbed severely, and the wound inflicted by that falling stone was smarting viciously.

Blood was trickling down over his face, giving him a repulsive expression in that yellow light, and it took several minutes longer for him to rally sufficient nerve to make an examination of his freshest hurt, by means of his finger-ends.

He reached the same conclusion with Solemn Saul, not many minutes earlier, and with that fear set at rest—for what would be his fate should his injuries prove severe enough to prevent his climbing up the knotted rope, unaided?—the judge began to think of pushing to the end the business which had brought him on such an odd excursion for one under the doctor's care.

He fumbled in his breast, to produce a small, flat flask of brandy, giving a long breath of relief and gratitude commingled, as he found its contents were safe, notwithstanding his fall upon those stones.

"I'll need it! Need it bad!" he muttered, huskily, as he drew the cork to liberally sample the fiery poison. "I've got to look for—IT! And then—if I hadn't strength enough left to climb out?"

He shivered afresh as that more than ugly thought again obtruded itself. He knew that he would not dare call for help, even though the alternative must be death by starvation—or madness!

He drained the half-pint flask to its last drop, nearly unnerved by that hideous dread. To be penned up in that shaft, together with—even in thought he dared not name it, yet neither could he refrain from thinking of it, and of his fate should he be doomed to pass his final hours in that hideous companionship.

Of course all this was but part of that unfortunate accident, and as his senses grew clearer, his strength coming back, Hugh Chadwick took a far more rational view of his surroundings. The powerful stimulant began to do its work before long, and the judge soon plucked up courage enough to cast a searching look around him.

At first he seemed relieved by not discovering what he came so far to examine, but then, as the probable meaning of that failure flashed across his still whirling brain, a sharp exclamation escaped his lips, and catching up the lantern, Hugh Chadwick staggered to his feet.

The sudden rising caused the blood to rush to his brain, and for a brief space he was forced to lean against the wall of the shaft, blind, dizzy, almost suffocating. But that did not last long, and as the smothering hand relaxed its death-grip from around his heart, the judge cast a flash of light before him, laying bare the mouth of that short drift.

"In there—he must have crawled off, to die!

He *did* die! Don't I know it? Don't I know that he *couldn't* have come to life after taking such a fall?"

The first sound of his own voice caused the judge to shrink and cower, but then it seemed to lend him fresh courage: something of which he stood in sore need just then!

He kept muttering, mumbling, as he gathered courage to pursue his gruesome investigations. Already that yellow fan of light had shown him no bones of dead men were to be found in the shaft itself. But in yonder drift—

"And yet, if he *did* die, who is Bouncer Bragg?"

That thought completed his cure, for the time being, and flashing that yellow fan before him, Hugh Chadwick moved toward the drift, his right hand nervously gripping the butt of a revolver.

He was looking for the dead, not for a living foe, yet that weapon seemed something like friendly companionship, and he sorely felt the need of some such support, just then.

He felt the need still more when the light fell across that grimly hideous object, lying on a sloping bank of earth, its shriveled lips drawn back in what seemed a fiendish grin, laying bare its still sound teeth.

Hugh Chadwick sprang back, almost turning to flee. Almost, but not quite. And then, though his limbs trembled beneath the weight of his body, he forced himself to advance.

Those eyes were not watching him. Time, which had spared so much of the rest, had done its work thoroughly in that direction, and only twin hollows showed where had once gleamed and sparkled the light of life and reason.

"He can't see!"

Under different circumstances that ejaculation of intense relief and thankfulness would have deserved a laugh, but, oddly enough, that very fact did more than all the rest to bring back the nerve which the judge had lost since leaving the mouth of that deserted shaft.

He kept the light bearing full upon that ghastly caricature of frail humanity, slowly moving closer, until he could have touched the nearest portion with an extended hand.

He keenly scrutinized the head and face, trying to trace a resemblance to a mental portrait which passing time had not yet dimmed, but without success.

The flesh had not decayed, but seemed to have shrunk, to have dried away until only enough was left to thinly cover those bones. The hair still clung to the dried scalp, and the skin seemed turned to dry parchment, or leather, wrinkled and discolored, defying recognition by even the keenest of eyes.

Hugh Chadwick, now fairly himself again, pressed his examination closer, putting up his pistol and placing the lantern on a projecting rock, from whence its widening rays fell fairly across that ghastly relic, in order to leave him the full use of his hands.

He passed from the head to the body, using his sensitive fingers to probe each pocket, drawing forth whatever article he found therein, although his very first discovery convinced him that his hopes were fully confirmed: that this ghastly relic was indeed the one for which he had taken this trip.

The glitter of gold had caught his eye, and drawing forth a heavy silver watch, by its linked chain, Hugh Chadwick forced the rusted spring open, to stare fixedly at the name rudely scratched on the inner side of that case.

How often had he seen those rude letters, in days gone by! How many times had he rallied its owner for not disposing of the clumsy "turnip" and buying another, better suited to the times and conditions.

"And now—what'll I do with these things?" the judge asked himself, as he paused in his search, to stare darkly at what his search had already brought to light. "If I took them—no! If he's found, by some unlucky chance, and any evil streak of luck should turn investigation my way? And yet—if they should be found on this—thing?"

It was no easy matter to decide, either way, but Hugh Chadwick finally accepted a substitute, pulling a loose stone from near the further side of the drift, scratching the hollow a little deeper, then pressing the watch, chain and other tell-tale articles firmly into place, covering them with clay, then crowding the stone back to its original position.

"They'll be safe enough there until I can decide whether or no I'd best come back after them," muttered Chadwick, drawing back, to gaze once more upon the hideous witness of a ruthless man's crime.

He had found enough to assure him that the poor unfortunate must have suffered untold torture before death came to his relief. Both legs had been broken, the bones cutting through the trousers he had worn when hurled to his doom down that dark shaft.

"He must have worn himself out with vain shouting for help," the assassin mused, as he stared at the work of his evil passions. "I never gave a thought to that danger. I believed death would be instantaneous. If some one had heard him—but they *didn't*, good luck me!"

Never a word of sympathy or of pity for the

poor devil whose final hours must have been horrible indeed.

But then the judge gave a start and a sharp exclamation, turning almost livid as a fresh peril suggested itself.

"What if he knew—what if he tried to write down—"

Once more he fell to work searching the mummy, his fears strengthened by finding the stump of a lead pencil lying close to the body!

What if his victim had managed to write a positive statement of all that he knew—of all that could help in tightening a noose about the throat of his assassin?

For several minutes Hugh Chadwick had a foretaste of purgatory, but as he found nothing to confirm that sudden suspicion, his nerves gradually regained their tone, and he forced a low laugh at his own idle fears.

"The poor devil had enough else to think of, I reckon!" he mumbled, as he drew back from that fruitless examination. "He couldn't have lived long after such a fall, and even if he *had*—he couldn't have been in a fit state for writing anything!"

Still, he was reluctant to leave this silent evidence of his foul deed, and only did so after once more searching those garments. Then, picking up his lantern and walking backward, he carefully smoothed over such marks as his feet had left on the dry earth, or gravel, rather.

Gaining the shaft, he tested the rope, keeping guard against the possibility of another falling rock, then extinguished his lantern, to clutch the rope and begin his toilsome ascent.

To stop when barely half-way to the top, as he caught the sounds of fierce shouts and angry yells, coming from Gopher Slope!

CHAPTER XXXII.

BART CLOUGH EARNS HIS MONEY.

BURIED in utter darkness, when once that trap-door was closed, the Boomer from Blissful Buttes could hardly be expected to break forth into a joyful song of thanksgiving for the mercies thus far vouchsafed him! And yet, even now, Bouncer Bragg proved himself something of a philosopher.

"In a hole; call it a jug! In the dark; good chance to meditate over the follies which even the wisest of our race will occasionally commit, especially when led from the broad road where peaceful mediocrity is content to slowly, if surely git thar! In darbies; call them love's shackles, and imagine they're a good thing to have—and a great deal better to hold! Ay! there's the rub! They hold too mighty much of my mother's son!"

Bouncer Bragg, while characteristically striving to make the best of his situation, rather more than suspected that he had only been shifted from frying-pan to fire. Still, he did not entirely regret having yielded to the persuasions of the city marshal.

"For one thing, I'm still alive, and able to kick, if I can't strike two ways for as many heads at the same time!" he reflected, while groping in the dark around those four stone walls. "If my death-warrant has been sealed, as I rather more than suspect, the goods would have been delivered, just as surely from that place as from this hole. All might have been over by this time, had I cut up rusty. Now—well, I still have my tongue left!"

That blind groping satisfied him there were no means of entering the jail save from the roof. He had heard and noted the grim warning given David Arnold by Fred Galloway, and he believed that the little sport would be on his guard against an outbreak.

"I don't believe my enemies—or guards, rather—will dare go so far as to shoot or knife me, though they *may* turn me over to the mob for lynching. If so—once in the open air, I reckon I can fight off the rope long enough to wake up the better portion of the Slope!"

Time dragged slowly enough, with so many ugly doubts pressing upon the luckless Boomer, and he gave a little gasp of relief when, several hours after his incarceration, the trap-door above gave a creak, to open and permit him a glimpse of the stars before a human head and shoulder obscured that glad vision.

"I say, Bragg!" came a hasty whisper, which certainly resembled the tones of David Arnold. "Trouble brewing! Will you help fight for your own life, if I set you free?"

"Try me, and see for yourself, gentle sir!" came the prompt response. "I'll give you a round dozen tickets to Blissful Buttes, just for the chance of hurting somebody!"

"All right! Stand from under, then!"

The rude platform descended, bearing two men, one of whom hastily muttered as he stepped to the stone floor:

"Hold out your hands, while I unlock—"

A bull's-eye flashed blindingly into the Boomer's face, and as he staggered back with a low cry, strong hands closed upon his throat, bearing him to the floor, holding him helpless while the man with the light set it down, to produce a thick muffer, meant for closing lips and eyes as well.

But in that brief interval, Bouncer Bragg caught sight of both faces; one was that of a stranger, the other that of Bart Clough!

Taken so completely by surprise, ironed as he was, Bouncer Bragg stood little show of holding out against those burly knaves, though he fought with a vigor worthy of a better ending.

"Don't ye be sech a cussed fool, critter!" harshly growled Clough, as he knotted the muffler in place. "We're doin' all we know how to save the blessed neck o' ye from gittin' pulled out longer'n a spy-glass!"

Unceremoniously dumping their blinded captive upon the platform, one man held him steady while the other worked the rude elevator. The roof was gained in safety, and after Bouncer Bragg was pushed past the trap, the opening was closed, leaving all below in apparent good order.

On the opposite side of the trap-door, David Arnold lay, bound and gagged, just as though he had been surprised while on duty, possibly through being worn out by the loss of sleep during the last three nights.

"You kin jest 'splain how she come so, boss," chuckled Bart Clough, giving the marshal a gentle dig in the short ribs with the toe of his boot. "But ef you've mem'ry 'nough left fer to spot a critter like me, by voice or smell, you want to fergit it all afore you've a show to clear your own record—ye mind? I'm a bad man, from backwaters, an' I've got a record o' seventeen city marshals up to date!"

"Cheese it!" gruffly muttered his present mate, who was peering over the low stone parapet. "The boys are growing uneasy, and if they take a notion to come up— You hear that?"

"Hustle him down, or we're comin' up!" called out a guarded voice from the ground, below.

"Comin', pards!" huskily called forth Bart Clough, catching hold of Bouncer Bragg and jerking him to his feet, growling: "Walk, critter! Or I'll jest bounce ye right over the ruff!"

Knowing that he was helpless to resist, and still clinging to hope, Bouncer Bragg made no resistance, but walked down the narrow, rail-guarded stairs, to be greeted by a low, sullen rumble of vicious voices.

"Choke it down, all o' ye!" angrily snarled Bart Clough, clinging to an arm of his prisoner with one hand, making fierce gestures toward that evil gang with his free hand. "Do ye want to kick the pudlin' clean over? Do ye want to fetch Gallus Fred an' his kin down this way, jest wolfen' fer wool?"

"Close in here, you fellows!" sternly muttered the other guard, coming to his partner's assistance. "You ought to know the sort of metal Galloway is made of, and you do know that he's been busy enlisting men to stall off just such a job as this we've taken in hand."

"Durn Galloway!" came a coarse voice from near the outer edge of that crowding mass. "He's only one man, an' not so mighty much of a man at that."

"The rope'll hold up his weight, too!"

"I'd rather you tried to tie the knot than do it myself," bluntly retorted the tall guard, utilizing the starlight, already helped by the rays of the rising moon, to select his most reliable men for the purpose of forming a compact cordon around the muffled prisoner. "Don't forget that Galloway would have what's called the law on his side!"

"We're the law, I reckon, boss!"

"We're here to do the work the law ought to perform, but whether or no we succeed, depends pretty much on how you fellows act. I'm willing to take the lead in hanging a murderer, but I'm not so eager to shoot down white men while trying to rope an assassin!"

"Nur me, nuther!" chipped in Bart Clough, too ambitious to rest content in the shadow of another's prominence. "An' so—button up, all o' ye who want to pay off Shang Draper's score!"

"Those who openly invite a struggle which must end in rescuing the prisoner, or slaying innocent men, can be nothing better than friends who are working for the release of Bouncer Bragg!" sternly spoke the taller guard, pistol in hand as he took a step in advance of his men who had Bouncer Bragg closely surrounded.

"Steady, all of you! Show white, before we go any further! If there is a man here who is afraid or ashamed to show his face and read his title clear, I reckon he's a mighty good subject to chuck into the jug, there to wait until the clouds roll by!"

"That's what!" called out Bart Clough. "Face up, lads! Ready fer 'spection by the giner!"

As a bloodthirsty mob will sometimes do, this gang readily caught at that rather curious suggestion, and amid much subdued chuckling, they ranged themselves in a double line, facing inward, forming a narrow lane, through which the tall guard slowly paced, peering into the face of each man in turn.

The result of his inspection seemed to be satisfactory, for he returned to the little knot gathered so closely around Bouncer Bragg, then spoke loud enough for all to catch his words:

"From the manner in which some of you talk-

ed, friends, I began to suspect Gallus Fred had wrung in a cold deck on us!"

"We're all wool, an' two yards wide, boss!"

"Gallus Fred hain't into it, this game!"

"No, he's left—left mighty bad, too!"

"That's all right, just so he stays left! Now—to business, lads. You know the programme: the hanging tree, a stout rope and a mighty short shrift! Some of you hustle on ahead, to pick up brush for a flare, and get the rope ready. After we get Bouncer under the limb, we don't want to waste any time in bouncing him into eternity!"

A subdued cheer greeted that grim play upon words, and the majority of the crowd hastened away toward the sturdy tree which had served as a gallows on more than one prior occasion.

Those guarding Bouncer Bragg followed, keeping in the darkest shadows, pausing at brief intervals as though to listen for a possible approach of enemies, yet making fairly good time, for all that.

When fairly in sight of the "hanging tree," another halt was called, and Bart Clough passed on in advance, to make sure all was working well, and that there was no possibility of an ambuscade being sprung upon them, just as they might count their success fully assured.

He found material for two huge bonfires collected, ready for the torch, while busy hands were putting the finishing touch on the rope.

"Good enough, lads!" he chuckled, making his presence known. "Start the blaze, so we kin all see the pesky critter do his wind-dance!"

While some bent over the brush piles, others rushed back to help bring forward the doomed Boomer, with difficulty choking down the wild, fierce yells which reckless men so delight in.

The flames shot up rapidly, casting a lurid glow over and around the gnarled death-tree, lighting up those rough-clad, heavily armed men, who gave a low, ominous, rumbling growl as they caught sight of that compact squad hastening to the spot.

But before the two parties could fairly mix into one, there came the interruption which the tall guard had foreboded; a rush of armed citizens, each one ready to back up their leader; a dapper, neatly garbed little sport, who promptly cried aloud the warning:

"Hold hard! If there's bound to be a hanging-see, I'm going to be the judge who selects the proper fruit!"

"Gallus Fred!"

"Close in, men!" cried a hoarse voice from among the lynchers. "To us! Close in, and hold fast to the murder-cr!"

"Close in goes!" shrilled Gallus Fred, charging recklessly, but without firing. "Save the Bouncer, men! No lynching! No—Where is he?"

Ay, where was Bouncer Bragg? Not among the lynchers, at all events!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HOW THE TRICK WAS TURNED.

THERE was trickery afoot that night, and a certain portion of that double-dealing centered about Bouncer Bragg, but whether for his own benefit, or for that of others, remains to be seen.

His first inkling of a trick inside a trick, came while the tall guard was marshaling the lynchers into line for inspection, to make sure Fred Galloway hadn't "stocked the cards" on them.

A low, earnest voice whispered into his ears: "This part o' us is playin' to git ye clear, boss! Ef you love life an' hate the rope, don't try to kick up a row, but jest lay back an' go jest as we shove ye!"

Despite his muffled ears, it was easier for Bouncer Bragg to hear than to believe. He felt almost certain that voice belonged to one of the men who had captured him in jail, and rather more than suspected he was one of the guards chosen by David Arnold to assist in transferring him to the "stone jug." If so, what trust could be placed in that hasty whisper?

On the other hand, what good could he hope to effect by "kicking up a row," as Bart Clough put it? Certainly none, unless Fred Galloway and his friends were near enough to hear and take heed.

At each one of those brief pauses, after moving away from the jail, Bart Clough or the tall guard took occasion to drop an encouraging word into those ears, but the moment for action came before Bouncer Bragg had fairly decided between those two beliefs.

"Ready, pardner!" came the low warning in the voice of the tall guard, whose strong hand closed upon his arm, pushing him at a sharp angle to the right, leaving the little squad of body-guards to close about what certainly appeared to be a bound and blindfolded captive, who was being hurried on to his doom!

"Not a whimper, or we're both lost!" added that earnest whisper, as its owner hurried Bouncer Bragg along through the shadows, to soon after pause by the side of saddled and bridled horse. "Trust me, and the hangman's rope shall go hungry this night!"

With a heave and a toss, he lifted Bouncer Bragg fairly into the saddle, then sprang up

behind him, an arm passing on each side of the still blindfolded Boomer, to grip the reins and head the doubly laden animal toward the north-western hills.

"I say, gentle stranger," ventured Bouncer, as the good horse started ahead. "What's the matter with—"

Muffled, indistinct though his speech necessarily was, his present guardian seemed to think it too dangerous an element, just then, for one strong hand flew up to close firmly over Bragg's mouth.

"Not a whisper, man!" with an angry hiss in his guarded tones, "If we're found out before the trick is fairly turned, salt can't save us!"

A touch of his heel quickened the pace of his horse, though the rocky nature of the soil warned him against breaking into a trot, much less gallop. The clatter of hoofs could hardly pass without an investigation, and that must be delayed as long as possible.

"You'd ought to know that much!" volunteered his guard, drawing rein after a few minutes' retreat. "Now, will you pass your honor not to give fresh trouble, if I open your peepers?"

"I promise to play as white as you treat me, sir," coolly replied the Boomer, by no means fully satisfied that all was as an honest man could wish it. "If you—thanks for so much, gentle stranger! And if I haven't sold you a ticket to—no, neither one of us has been so fortunate, as yet!"

The muffler fell from his face, and turning his head quickly, Bouncer Bragg flashed a keen, suspicious look into the face of his guard, before his purpose could be guarded against.

It was the face of an utter stranger, so far as he could determine by that uncertain light. At all events, it was one point gained to know that he was not in the hands of Hugh Chadwick!

There was no time for more. Just then a wild tumult arose from the direction of the hanging-tree, and the tall stranger tightened his grip about the waist of the Boomer, saying:

"They've smoked the trick, at last! Now, pardner, the next few minutes mean a great deal to you, one way or the other!"

"Heap noise, but mighty little wool, I reckon!" commented Bouncer Bragg, helped in locating the point of trouble by that rising glow. "More farce than tragedy, don't you reckon, gentle stranger?"

"You'd ought to give thanks, in place of mockery, sir! If one shot is fired, down yonder, scores will follow, and for one life saved, fifty may be lost! I'm thinking of that, Bouncer Bragg!"

The Boomer was strongly impressed by that grave manner, and almost for the first time since those irons had been snapped about his wrists, he began to hope for life and liberty. Surely a man who could preach after this fashion, ought to be something akin in his practice!

That uproar grew louder instead of calming down, though as yet the contending parties had not fallen to burning powder, no doubt because they were thrown into utter confusion by the strange vanishment of the bone of contention.

The racket was still splitting the air, when the tall stranger gave a little exclamation of joy, as his keen eyes caught sight of an approaching figure, and though he sent a challenge in that direction, it sounded more a matter of form than of actual precaution:

"Steady, there! Who comes?"

"Jest me, pardner!" came the response, in the hoarse, peculiar voice of Bart Clough. "Good glory! hain't them critters jest bu'stin' things wide open, though?"

"There's no fighting, I hope?"

"Not yit, but ef they don't find somebody fer to pay off on, I'm open to lay long odds they'll git to playin' cats afore many more minnits—good luck go with the sharpest claws!"

"I hope not! We've got what we played for, and—will you ride, pardner?"

"No, hang to the critter, boss. I kin trot the night through, ef I hee tol. An' then—thar's plenty more work to do, ye know, boss?"

"And the quicker we get where we can bring that work to a head, the better for all hands concerned!"

"What part am I expected to play, gentle strangers?" asked Bouncer Bragg, as the horse was set in motion, heading away from Gopher Slope.

"Play sbet trap, fu'st thing, dug-gun ye!" growled Bart Clough, before his present partner could make reply. "Button up, or we'll slit the tongue o' ye—too mighty quick for any sort o' use!"

"Sold again, or I'm no Bouncer!" exploded the Boomer, but before he could make any move toward bettering his situation, the keen point of a knife was brought dangerously near his throat by the arm which encircled his body, and a low, stern voice spoke:

"Steady, Bouncer Bragg! It's not *your* life we're after, but information. Still, rather than let you escape now, I'd kill you without a scruple!"

Bart Clough trotted alongside the horsemen, casting an occasional glance backward toward the hanging-tree, from whence still came the

uproar of infuriated men; but neither Clough nor those on horseback caught sight of that dark figure rising from behind a friendly rock, the better to note their course.

"Talk 'bout luck!" came the chuckling voice of Solemn Saul, in unusual glee for a professional "Sad Man," as he cautiously left his covert to follow after those receding figures. "Ef I hain't jest ketchin' bull gobs of it, then I want to know the reason *why*!"

Bouncer Bragg seemed convinced that open resistance could only make his situation worse, and he gave his present guardians no extra trouble, even chaining his tongue with silence. He took note of each crook and turn in their course, though he could see precious little prospect of benefiting by that precaution. Still, it kept his mind from debating even uglier matters.

After passing to a considerable depth among those hills, a halt was called in a little opening where the moon shed sufficient light for their purpose, and Bart Clough assisted Bouncer Bragg to alight, then moving away with the horse, to tether it until needed again.

"Bouncer Bragg, as you see fit to call yourself," began the tall man, whom we have seen figuring as "John Smith," when Hungry Mike Dobson cheated the lynchers' noose, in pretty much the same manner as, on this occasion, the Boomer had evaded it, "I reckon you've had time to make up your mind we're not doing all this purely for amusement. We are not. It's sober business, and while I'd hate mightily to put out your light, out it shall go, unless you meet us half way!"

"An' as the fust step, critter, what's the reason Hugh Chadwick hes tuck sech a mortal dislike to the likes o' ye?" chipped in Clough.

"You tell, gentle fraud, for I'm blessed if I can!"

"Steady, Bouncer Bragg! This is stern business, you want to bear in mind. You have played the buffoon pretty successfully in Gopher Slope, but such nonsense won't go down here. What cause have you given Hugh Chadwick for wanting to get you out of the way?"

"Then he *does* wish my removal?" innocently asked the Boomer.

"You know it. You know that he has cause to hate, if not actually fear you. Between the two, we would far rather serve you than the judge. Then, why not trust us with the secret hold you have on him?"

"But if I have no hold?"

"You're not here to argue, sir. I asked you a plain question, and I expect a plain answer. Go on!"

"All right, and 'go on' goes. I have no hold on Hugh Chadwick, other than that born of a troubled conscience."

"Augh, let me pinch him, boss!" disgustedly growled Bart Clough. "Don't I know he's lyin'? Would the judge shell out his dollars the way he hes, ef he didn't know this pizen critter was tryin' to sock it to him, in the heel?"

"Then you admit that Hugh Chadwick hired you to run me off?" sharply demanded Bouncer Bragg, losing sight of caution in growing anger.

"It's for you to confess, not for us," coldly said John Smith. "And if you really value your life, Bouncer Bragg, you will meet us on the level. You are not what you pretend. You came to Gopher Slope expressly to—*do what*?"

"Boom the Blissful Buttes for all they're worth, gentle stranger!" glibly explained Bragg. "And if you're thinking of laying up provision against old age, you really cannot do better than invest a dollar or two in the greatest, richest, most extraordinary chance which—"

"Augh, come down!" exploded Bart Clough. "Ef it's dollars you want to talk about, jest listen: Hugh Chadwick paid me five hundred of 'em ef I'd agree to kill you! Now—how'd you rather die, critter?"

"Of old age!" rung forth a sharp, stern voice, followed immediately by its owner, cocked and leveled pistols in his hands. "Steady, both of you! I've got you lined, and I'll drill center at your first move!"

Solemn Saul Sunday was very much "on deck!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE JUDGE KEEPS AN APPOINTMENT.

MISTRESS POLLY MAYDEW tapped gently at first, but as no answer came from the chamber, her plump knuckles struck the panel more vigorously, only ceasing when Hugh Chadwick called forth, drowsily:

"Hello! what's the—you, is it, Polly?"

"Breakfast's waiting, sir, and there's a note waiting, also!"

"A note? Who from?"

"I didn't ask, but the boy gave in a card with the letter, and that bears the name of Knight, if I haven't missed it. Will you—"

"I'll get up—yes!" and there came the creak of springs as the judge rolled out of bed.

Polly Maydew retreated to the lower regions, and Chadwick was not long in making his appearance at the breakfast table.

He looked something the worse for wear, and his head was enveloped in a fresh handkerchief. This concealed the injury he had received by that falling stone, but Polly asked no questions, naturally attributing it to his first wound.

Gruffly cutting short her questions concerning his rest, his hurt, and kindred matters, Hugh Chadwick tore open the sealed envelope, slowly going over the contents after taking in their purport by a hasty glance.

His brows gathered darkly as he studied, yet there was nothing very unexpected in what he saw: a brief note, bearing the signature of Nathan Knight, stating that he, the writer, would be pleased to meet the owner of the Neverfail, at that mine, at ten o'clock that same day. But it was the sentence which followed over which the judge pondered the longest:

"I have requested several of the gentlemen named as having witnessed the transfer of said mine, to meet us at that time and place."

"Curse your impudence! What right have you to do any inviting? For little I'd—"

But he knew better, and left that sullen thought unfinished. While feeling morally certain that Bart Clough had fully earned his money, after the sounds he had caught the night before, and believing as he did that no other troublesome witness could possibly arise to ruin his plans, Hugh Chadwick dared not invite still closer investigation by either asking or forcing a further delay.

He looked at his watch, and saw that he would not even have time to go down town far enough to learn just what had taken place last night. He dared not question Polly Maydew, lest he awaken her suspicions.

"I'd give a pretty sum if I could have just one more day of perfect security!" he muttered, leaving the table to prepare for a tramp to the Neverfail. "Well, *they'll* be mighty apt to know how the game worked, and I reckon I've got nerve enough to hold my own, no matter what turns up!"

Fortifying himself with a couple of glasses of brandy, Hugh Chadwick armed himself, though stowing the weapons carefully out of sight, then put on his hat and left home, heading direct for the Neverfail.

Thanks to the heavy sleep—almost stupor—which had overtaken him that night, after stealing unseen and unheard back to his chamber, it was fully ten o'clock before the judge left his house, but by brisk walking he managed to reach the place of appointment before the patience of Nathan Knight and those bearing him company, was quite exhausted.

"Sorry if I've kept you waiting, gentlemen," cried out the judge as he drew near the rude structure which served as offices for those managing the Neverfail, the mouth of which was guarded by a strong stockade, which inclosed the office as well. "I've had a pretty rocky time of it," touching his bandaged head, gently, "and my housekeeper permitted me to oversleep myself."

"Better late than never, judge!" cheerily called back one of the two gentlemen whom Nathan Knight had chosen from among those who had witnessed the sale of the Neverfail, to Hugh Chadwick, by Ethelbert Lawrence. "We'll make up our witness fees by fining you for lack of punctuality!"

That tone was so cheery, those faces so free from aught of care or trouble, that Hugh Chadwick felt a corresponding elevation, and no man could have given Nathan Knight a more cordial grasp of the hand, or have seemed more entirely at ease than the judge.

The quartette entered the dingy office, seating themselves about the rude table, and plunging into business with little more time cut to waste.

Hugh Chadwick had come fully prepared, bringing all the papers he deemed essential to reaching a perfect understanding, and with very few words by way of explanation, he submitted these to Nathan Knight for his inspection.

Without apologizing for his thoroughness, seeing that all present were men of business, the agent carefully went over each document in its turn, saying nothing until his preliminary examination was complete.

Folding the papers as before, and placing them in a neat pile on the table, Nathan Knight removed his glasses, twirling them about a finger as he smiled blandly upon the judge while speaking.

"So far as I see, Mr. Chadwick, these documents are all right, and nothing essential lacking. If these gentlemen are prepared to declare their signatures are correct—will you oblige us, gentlemen?"

That formality did not take long. The papers were looked over, and each of the two witnesses declared that they had signed, as such.

"Thank you, gentlemen," bowed the agent, then turning squarely upon the judge, holding his eyes with a steady yet hardly unfriendly gaze, Nathan Knight added: "Now, Mr. Chadwick, and you, gentlemen, I will explain why I have taken so many seemingly unwarranted precautions in this case."

"I had a sister, who married a gentleman named Ethelbert Lawrence. Yes, judge, the very same man who was your partner," with a bow, as Hugh Chadwick uttered a sharp exclamation.

"I didn't know—"

"Of course not. Why should you?" smiled Nathan Knight. "For one thing, Lawrence was anything but communicative, concerning

his private affairs. For another, he and I were never the best of friends. But such trifling details cannot interest any one of you, and I'll pass them by, in favor of points which I must bring forward."

"After the death of my sister, at her request I gave a home to the sole living child of that union: a daughter. Lawrence, who seemed heart-broken by the death of his wife, could not content himself in the place where she had shared his fortunes, and so—he finally drifted West, to seek his fortune."

"Lawrence was never much of a letter-writer, and after he drifted West, we heard from him only at long and rare intervals. As a proof of this, I need only state that I never knew that he had gone to mining, or that any such mine as the Neverfail was in existence, until very near the date which these documents bear."

"Then a missent letter reached his daughter, in which he spoke of sinking his little all in a mining venture, which he confidently expected would prove a veritable bonanza, in proof of which faith he had christened the new claim the 'Neverfail!'"

"Less than a week after this long-delayed letter was received, another came to his daughter, stating that he had bought out his partner, and was now sole owner of the Neverfail!"

"That was—he lied!" hotly exploded the judge, striking the table heavily with a clinched hand. "There lies the proof that I did the buying, *he* the selling out!"

"Wouldn't it be a bit more polite, Mr. Chadwick, to say mistaken?" coldly interposed Nathan Knight. "I prefer to deal with a gentleman, though I *have* dealt with coarse bullies ere to-day!"

"Come, come, gentlemen!" interposed one of the witnesses, soothingly. "It was all a mistake, of course. We know that, you know! Then—why not talk it over as gentlemen should, without hard names, and the like?"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Knight," Chadwick forced himself to say, extending a hand, but which the agent apparently overlooked in his solicitude for the papers scattered by that violent blow. "But when a body touches me on the Neverfail, it makes me *hot—red-hot*!"

"Let it pass for the present," coldly said Nathan Knight, then resuming his explanation:

"After that letter we heard no more from Ethelbert Lawrence. For some months we borrowed little trouble on that score, since still longer intervals had passed without word coming from our relative. But then, a firm of brokers offered some mining property for sale, to a syndicate with whom I had considerable business dealings, both as lawyer and as broker."

"The offer appeared a more than fair one, on its face, and the copies of papers were handed to me for investigation: quite commonly done, gentlemen, as I hardly need assure you, in these days of unlimited wildcat ventures!"

"In looking over the papers, I noticed the Neverfail prominently mentioned. The name was an odd one, and when I saw that it was offered for sale by one Hugh Chadwick, I looked deeper into the matter. That name also seemed familiar to me, and I was not long in finding out why it caught my attention: I found that the partner whom Lawrence wrote us he had bought out, was one Hugh Chadwick!"

"His only mistake lay in writing he *bought*, instead of *sold*!"

"So it appears, Mr. Chadwick," bowed Knight. "But, of course, I could not be expected to divine all that, with his letter to shape my mind just contrary. And so, as we had never heard from Lawrence since that last-named letter, I felt uneasy, as well as curious."

"That uneasiness was by no means set at rest when, before I could finish examining the papers, an unsigned note came to me, stating that Ethelbert Lawrence had bought, not sold, the Neverfail. I offered to show you the note, Mr. Chadwick, as you may remember."

"I know, but—'Twas a written lie! Did you ever know an anonymous writing that wasn't false as hell, sir?"

"I've had very little experience in that direction, sir. Still, even *you* cannot wonder that I advised the company to hold negotiations in abeyance until the case could be thoroughly investigated. I resolved to make the attempt on my own hook, but my niece, who had caught an inkling of what was going on, from my asking her for the letter containing names and dates, insisted on bearing me company, in search of her missing father."

"I tried to coax her off the notion, but—well, I had no child of my own, and she prevailed—of course! We started, and all went smoothly until we came near Gopher Slope. Then—But you remember how we were stopped by road-agents and robbed. Then I—"

"Beg your pardon for chipping without an invitation, but *can't* I sell you a chance in Blissful Buttes?" came a clear voice through the open window, and as they turned that way, *they saw Bouncer Bragg!*

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE FIRST BLOW FALLS.

THERE was no room left for doubting. Bouncer Bragg it surely was, not only alive but at lib-

erty, his head and shoulders framed in that little window, a decided smile upon his face, as he gazed steadily upon the villain who had paid at least one round price for his death.

For a single breath Hugh Chadwick sat staring, like one under a spell. But then, as he began to realize what this appearance might mean to him and to his plans, he gave a hoarse, choking snarl, springing to his feet as he jerked forth a revolver to—

"I wouldn't, judge!" came a voice from behind, and as a strong hand caught his wrist, throwing that armed hand upward, another snapped the first of a pair of handcuffs in place. "Sit down, judge!"

A deft kick and defter trip, forced Hugh Chadwick back into his chair, and almost ere he could fairly realize the fact, his hands were securely ironed.

"You—you devil!" he gasped, livid with rage and fear, but still retaining wit enough to play a bold hand. "What do you mean by this vile outrage?"

"Nothing much, judge," coolly retorted his captor; Thomas Mohrbacher, according to the garb he wore for the occasion, Solemn Saul Sunday as he is better known to us. "The merest trifle imaginable; you're arrested for murder, Hugh Chadwick!"

That face could not blanch whiter without its owner actually became a corpse, but where an ordinary villain might well have quailed, this one seemed to gain fresh nerve, for he flashed a fierce, vengeful look toward Nathan Knight as he gratefully cried:

"Is this one of *your* clumsy tricks? Bah! you scheming ass! Instead of cheapening the Neverfail, this foul conspiracy shall send its price half-way to the skies!"

"Look out that you don't try to keep pace with its ascension, my truly gentle stranger, by means of a rope!" laughingly exclaimed Bouncer Bragg, entering the little office by way of the door.

Hugh Chadwick tried to spring from his seat, his ironed hands lifting together as an ugly weapon with which to deal at least one avenging blow, but the detective was on his guard, and that effort was nipped in the bud.

"Who are you?" hoarsely demanded Chadwick, twisting his head around far enough to flash a fiery glance into that disguised face.

"One of General Dave Cook's boys, judge."

"Then I order you to place that traveling fraud under arrest for trespass! Arrest him, or kick him out!"

"This building belongs to the owner of the Neverfail mine, doesn't it, judge?" blandly asked Bouncer Bragg, leaning with one hand lightly on the table.

"It belongs to me, and—"

"Oh, if you get down to solid lying, judge, count me out! As for you, gentlemen, all, I've got a few words to say by way of explanation, which I think you will admit worth the time it takes to drink them in."

"On what subject, sir?" asked Nathan Knight, a little stiffly.

"The Neverfail mine, and its legal owner."

"I am that owner, and I appeal to you, gentlemen, as men of honor, to support me in my legal rights!" cried the judge. "You witnessed the sale, you saw me pay the money for all right and—"

"When a fellow don't know enough to take a hint gracefully, then he mustn't complain if he is treated—*just like this!*"

With a deft movement Solemn Saul gagged his prisoner, and then a turn or two of strong rope held him helplessly in his seat.

Nathan Knight and the two citizens of the Slope, watched in grave silence. If neither assisted in that summary operation, neither did they lift a finger to hinder.

"Now, Bouncer Bragg, you can unload your budget," coolly spoke up the detective, standing at ease behind his prisoner.

"For Bouncer Bragg, read—but that can wait," the ex-boomer quickly caught himself. "Enough that I saw fit to play the part, simply as a cover under which I might pursue the investigations which brought me to Gopher Slope."

"To go back to the beginning, I was clerking in a broker's office, in New York, when I had my notice first called to something dubious in this Neverfail affair. As good luck would have it, I was acting temporarily as private secretary to one of the firm, which gave me fair access to letters in which the Neverfail was spoken of as being on the market. I had heard considerable about that mining property, and, for what I deemed very good reasons, I asked for and secured a vacation."

"I came to Gopher Slope in disguise, playing a part which, I begin to believe, though rather late in the day, was better calculated to adorn the pages of a sensational detective tale, than to win the point I had in view. Still, I managed to make at least a partial success of the matter."

"For instance; I have found out, for a certainty, that Ethelbert Lawrence, who was one of the original discoverers of the Neverfail Mine, actually paid Hugh Chadwick the full amount demanded by the latter for his right, title and interest in said mining property."

Hugh Chadwick strove hard to speak, and

finding that he could only give vent to an inarticulate growl in his throat, his eyes turned almost pleadingly upon the face of the detective who had rendered him so helpless.

"You ask me to set your tongue at liberty, judge?"

Hugh Chadwick gave a vigorous nod in the affirmative.

"If I do so, will you confine yourself to half-way decent argument? Will you be content with denying what you claim is wrong, and plainly stating what you declare is right?"

Though his slowly purpling face showed how little he relished those conditions, Hugh Chadwick gave another nod, and Solemn Saul quickly removed the gag.

"I positively deny that I ever offered to sell my share of the Neverfail to Ethelbert Lawrence, or any other man!" declared the judge.

"And I stand ready to prove what I now deliberately repeat: you not only offered to sell your share, but you *did* sell it, and you *did* take the money from your former partner."

"Bare and empty assertion lacks a vast deal of being solid proof!" sneered the judge. "When I say that I bought, instead of selling, I can point out my witnesses to that transaction. You two, among others no less reputable, can bear me out in this?"

The two gentlemen interchanged troubled looks, and then one of them spoke for both:

"We certainly did witness just such a sale, judge."

"You hear that?" flashing a look of fierce triumph toward the man who has figured in these pages as Bouncer Bragg.

"My ears are sound, thanks," with a light bow. "There *was* a transaction of that nature, I believe, but Ethelbert Lawrence did not take part or parcel in it."

"Who was it, then, if not Lawrence?" sharply asked the merchant.

"My uncle, Cyrus Whitfield!"

"Impossible, sir! I knew Whitfield, and he certainly could not have so completely imposed upon me!"

"Nor upon me," just as decidedly chimed in the other witness.

"So you believe, of course, gentlemen, but all the same, time will show how shamefully you were betrayed into aiding a cunning trickster. What I say now, I stand ready to prove before any court of law in the country, and I shall not make a single assertion which is not fully backed up by naked facts. Now—listen!"

"I knew that my uncle, Cyrus Whitfield, was living at a place called Gopher Slope. I likewise knew that he had gone to the bad, not to make too many bones about a painfully apparent fact. And it was partly in hopes of thus escaping recognition by my uncle, that I assumed a disguise, and tried to play the crazy role of Bouncer Bragg, the Boomer. But it was not until after I came here, that I even suspected the important part which Cyrus Whitfield had played in the Neverfail affair."

"You surely don't mean to—what part was that?" rather excitedly asked John Brandon, one of the witnesses.

"One minute, please," apologetically bowed the ex-boomer. "The judge appears to be slightly overcome, doubtless—"

"You lie!" hoarsely snarled Chadwick, rallying, though his face told how heavily those calm assertions had smitten him. "I deny all you have affirmed, and if there is justice to be obtained in the land, I'll lay you by the heels for one blessed term!"

"Are you quite sure it is *justice* you yearn for, judge?" blandly inquired the ex-boomer.

"Drop chaff, and get down to business, all hands!" cut in Sunday.

"All right, sir! You ask me what part Cyrus Whitfield played, and I answer with 'The part of Ethelbert Lawrence!' My uncle was an actor from early youth. If he had let whisky alone, he might have made his mark high on the scroll of fame, but whisky ruined him."

"Bah! only idiots could swallow such utter bosh!"

"It does sound incredible, surely! Then, if that man *was* Whitfield, where was Ethelbert Lawrence?" asked John Brandon.

"Dead! Slain by the tool Hugh Chadwick's money hired!"

"A lie, balder than the others! Prove it, curse you!"

"I will, to oblige you, judge. Bart Clough, show up, please!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

BART CLOUGH BEARS WITNESS.

As the ex-boomer uttered that call, clear and distinct, Hugh Chadwick gave a little start, and as Solemn Saul dropped a hand on his shoulder, he felt his prisoner shivering like one with an ague.

"Steady, judge!" he muttered, in grave warning. "I'm afraid you're cornered, but don't give yourself away until you just have to!"

"Bart Clough, I say!" repeated the ex-boomer, still more sharply.

"Comin', boss, an' you, gents!"

From the little room at the rear of the office,

used mainly for storing the tools, the burly shape of the self-admitted assassin made its appearance. His face was a trifle less florid than customary, but he betrayed no sign of fear, and his eyes frankly met those curious glances without flinching.

"If *this* marks the caliber of your witnesses, Nathan Knight," the judge forced himself to say, with outward calmness, "then I'll wait until I can meet you and all others before a court of justice. If I could stoop so low, I could buy his evidence for a drink of whisky!"

"Whisky must hev riz in a turrible hurry, judge, sence I've got jest a even eight hundred dollars o' your good money in my kicks, which you paid me fer smotherin' sech truth as I could show up!"

"Come to the point, sir," coldly spoke Nathan Knight. "You were not brought here to bandy words with the prisoner, but—"

"By what right am I held a prisoner?" savagely demanded Chadwick. "I'll make each and all of you suffer for this infamous outrage, or—"

Solemn Saul quietly dangled the gag before his face, and fearing to be still further hampered, the judge choked back his fierce recriminations. He surely would fight, and fight hard, but a better time for that lay in the future.

"Now, Bart Clough, just consider yourself on oath, as you will be before this matter comes to an end," sternly said Saul Sunday. "Tell all you know about the Neverfail, its former partners, the sale, and what finally became of Ethelbert Lawrence."

"And don't forget that the hour will roll round when I can cross-question you, under that same oath, Clough!"

"That's all right, judge," nodded the witness, quietly. "Tain't so mighty much hate ag'inst you, that makes me blow the gaff, as 'tis a wish to clear my own neck o' the noose!"

"Come to the point, witness!" frowned Nathan Knight.

"All right, boss! An', to begin with, I was one o' the fu'st hands the owners o' the Neverfail could 'ford to hire. An' so, ye see, I was in a fix to know pritty well how the ole thing panned out. In fact, fer a right smart while, I hed a mighty sight more faith in the Neverfail, then eyther o' its owners did! Mebbe beca'se I tuck in wages, whar they hed to pay 'em out! But that don't count does it?"

"Waal, the two didn't work in double, right smooth. They was each one a bit too bossy, I reckon. Anyway, jest afore the big lead was hit, they come too pritty rough words. One led to 'nother, ontel the jedge said *buy* or *sell*! an' Lawrence he said *buy*! An' buy he *did*, afore the next sun come up!"

"Don't forget the hereafter, Bart Clough!" sneered Chadwick.

"I'm tryin' not to, jedge," with a faint smile. "An' so, gents, as I come handiest, I was called in as witness to the sale. An' then, jest two days later, it was *my* shot that fu'st opened up the big vein!"

"Lawrence had struck it rich, an' of course he was 'way up in the clouds, while Chadwick was heap down in the dumps, as soon as he found it out, which was mighty quick after that shot was fired. An' then the devil tuck him, an' he ketched me!"

"It come heap sight easier than you'd think, ontel ye come to know jest how matters stood. That sale hedn't bin made public as yet."

"For reasons which you'd ought to readily guess, gentlemen!" the prisoner said, with a mocking laugh to follow that sneer.

"Lawrence wasn't a man to talk much, an' when the jedge axed him to hold his hush ontel he, the jedge, could skin out, he agreed. Nobody said *why*, but I didn't need that. The jedge owed too mighty much in town!"

"Waal, Lawrence was gwine off to git fresh stock, an' sech, an' Chadwick come at me with a bigger offer than I knowed how to throw over my shoulder: two hundred down, an' three more when I brung proof back that the job was did, to order."

"What job was that?" asked Nathan Knight.

"To kill Lawrence, sir. I said I'd do it, an' I fully 'tended bein' jest as good as my word, too! I started out ahead o' Lawrence, layin' in wait whar I knowed he'd pass, a-hossback. That was in Dead Man's Gulch, ye know, gents, an'—"

"I congratulate you on your witness, gentlemen!" sneered Chadwick. "A foul assassin, by his own free confession!"

"Hired by *your* money, Hugh Chadwick!" retorted Nathan Knight.

"He lies when he says so, and *you* lie when you re-echo the vile falsehood! But what else could be expected from a man who—"

"Shut up, or be shut, judge!" coldly warned Solemn Saul, once more bringing that gag into sight. "Go on, Clough. If you try to stretch the truth to make your sin lighter, we may believe you are feeding us with pure lies. *Sabe?*"

"I'm measurin' off straight goods, boss," almost meekly replied the witness. "If I give you even the ghost of a lie, I'll go up a tree if you just wink that way."

"Waal, as I set out to say, I lay in wait for Lawrence, fully sot on airnin' my pay. Not

that I hed any dislike to *him*, but I wanted money the wu'st sort, an' so—I tuck the fu'st show for big wages that come in my way.

"But 'twasn't to pan out jest the way I'd fixed it all up, gents. An' jest when I was cockin' my guns—fer I ketched the tromple o' huffs, an' knowed they wasn't much show o' ary other critter takin' that trail by moonlight—I was jumped by a he grizzly, or a cinnamon b'ar, I'm not so mighty sure jest which! An' it didn't make much odds, jest then, you better b'lieve.

"I didn't hev time to run, fer the dug-gun critter was jest on my back afore I hearn him. I *did* git to my feet, but that was all. I let him hev my guns, but the pills seemed to make him all the more frisky, 'stead o' sickening him. An' then, gents, the next I knowed was Ethelbert Lawrence takin' the fight off o' my hands!"

"The man you intended to assassinate?" ejaculated Nathan Knight.

"Jest him, sir," soberly nodded Bart Clough. "He lit in, with gun an' knife, an' killed the critter, though it pritty nigh done him up afore he come out atop the heap. I was bad hurt, but he was *wuss*, an' so—to cut it short, gents—I manidged to git him to a safe spot, whar I could nuss him back to life. I did it, too, but only to find that his head hed bin so bad hurt, he woke up clean crazy!

"I didn't dast to show up at the Slope, fer I reckoned my word wouldn't hold good ag'inst that of the jedge. An' so, hopin' to hev a solid back, I watched my chainece, an' got Lawrence clear to Denver, whar I putt him in a hospital, to be cured. Then, when he was cured, I reckoned it was high time to ondo part o' the mischief I'd worked, an' so I come back, with—"

"John Smith!" called out the ex-boomer, sharply.

Again that back door opened, and a tall figure stepped inside the office proper, flashing a keen glance over that little gathering, then passing around the table until he stood squarely in front of Hugh Chadwick.

The judge stared at that strong, grave face, no longer in disguise as it had been both times when he helped cheat the rope of a victim.

"What is your real name, witness?" asked the ex-boomer, slowly.

"Ethelbert Lawrence, sir."

The judge gave a violent start, but then burst out into a hoarse cry.

"Liar! you are *not* Ethelbert Lawrence, but *Cyrus Whitfield*!"

It was truly a forlorn hope, but the cornered villain caught at it, like the hackneyed swimmer and his straw.

"You are doing the lying, Hugh," with a touch of regret in his deep, serious tones. "What became of *Cyrus Whitfield*, I have not yet been able to learn, but I can readily guess how you won him over to imitate me, just as he had imitated a thousand other characters in his wild, reckless, devil-may-care day!"

"You say you are Ethelbert Lawrence?" asked Nathan Knight, whose keen gaze had never once left that face or figure since it came inside the office.

"I was Ethelbert Lawrence, the husband of your sainted sister," the latest comer bowed, gravely. "I have been a madman, but now—I will once more be Ethelbert Lawrence!"

"Liar! devil! impostor!" painfully gasped the unmasked villain.

"If you are really the man who married my sister, now dead and in her grave, what foolish record did you make of the day you won her promise of marriage?"

"One at which you scoffed, saying that a boy so silly was not fit to be trusted with a wife, Nathan Knight," came the reply, with a faint, sad smile, as he unbuttoned his sleeve and bared his left arm. "I tattooed a double heart, with our initials linked together. The bear spoiled part of it, but enough remains for you to recognize the design."

He held his arm out toward Nathan Knight, who gave one keen glance, then caught the hand and shook it warmly, saying, brokenly:

"Thank God for this mercy, my boy! I dared not hope for so much!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"MURDER WILL OUT!"

EVEN now Hugh Chadwick refused to admit his utter defeat. Even now he showed fight, proving himself a very bulldog for grit and tenacity.

"What an infernal set of bosh!" he cried, his face the picture of angry scorn, his voice betraying nothing of the terrible strain its owner surely must be undergoing. "Give me time and low cunning enough—and you are well supplied with both, gentlemen!—and I'll agree to prove the moon a bloodthirsty conspirator against the sun! I'll agree to show that any one among you is not only an assassin, but a sinner who is guilty of every crime named in the decalogue."

Nathan Knight flashed a stern glance across the table at the prisoner, then coldly spoke to Saul Sunday:

"Gag him, if he will not be silent."

"If you really insist, sir," bowed the detective. "Talking can't take the bark off, and

unless he has a safety-valve of some sort in working order, don't you reckon he might cheat justice by going bu'st?"

If he heard, Nathan Knight paid no heed. He was looking at the man whom he had fully identified as Ethelbert Lawrence, father to Norine, the dear girl who—

That tall form bowed, and with lips near an ear, he softly whispered:

"Are you trying to recognize the footpad, dear friend? If so, pray wait until I can explain all to my little girl, as well as to her kind uncle."

It was a rather risky venture, and Ethelbert Lawrence would never have made it, had he not fancied he saw the light of growing recognition in those keen brown eyes.

Nathan Knight gave a start, drawing back, to stare into that face, to take still closer note of that figure. And then, little by little, memory came to his aid, and he knew that this was indeed the chief of the road-agents who had halted their stage, and robbed them of every dollar they had along.

"Never mind me, gentlemen!" mocked Hugh Chadwick, noting that whisper, as well as the change of countenance which followed. "Practice makes perfect, and if a hitch comes in the dainty scheme just now, it surely ought to be polished off and made smooth-fitting before you are forced to give a public rehearsal!"

"There can be but *one* hitch—in public, Hugh Chadwick," coldly retorted Lawrence, turning toward the prisoner. "And that hitch will be fashioned by the public hangman, for your especial benefit."

"May you be near enough to see just when, where and how that hitch comes in, *Cyrus Whitfield*!"

"Why do you call me by that name, Hugh Chadwick?"

"Was that name a lie, together with all the rest, then?"

During these rapid changes, John Brandon and Henry Hough, the two citizens who had witnessed the transfer of the Neverfail from one partner to the other, as they firmly believed, watched and heard, both being little short of stupefaction. They had come prepared for some rather startling revelations, but nothing of this description.

"What are you fellows trying to get at, anyway?" at this point demanded Hough. "Who is who, and what is what?"

"That's me!" sharply chimed in Brandon. "Who are you, sir?" with a half-defiant nod toward Lawrence.

"You surely ought to know, without asking, friend Brandon," flashed forth the judge. "He's the man whose signature you witnessed, when—"

"Then you admit that he is Ethelbert Lawrence, your original partner, judge?" blandly asked the ex-boomer.

"No, you cur! I swear that he's *Cyrus Whitfield*, playing a part now, just as he played it then, to make money out of his devilish gifts!"

"Then you confess that it was *Whitfield* who personated *Lawrence* when that fictitious transfer of the Neverfail took place, judge?"

Even then Hugh Chadwick would not admit himself cornered. He was still full of fighting, and his reply was ready on the instant.

"I *thought* him *Lawrence*, and paid my good money on that basis, sir. But now—if Bart Clough really murdered Ethelbert, as he claims—"

"Don't I say I didn't do the job you paid me fer?"

"But now," steadily pursued the judge, paying no attention to that sullen interruption, "I can begin to see how I might possibly have been deceived by a cunning trickster!"

"Then that transfer was illegal, and you have no claim to the Neverfail, judge?" still more blandly asked the ex-boomer.

"Take me into open court, and I'll show you, all!" grimly laughed the desperate schemer. "I deny that this liar is Ethelbert Lawrence. I declare my firm belief that he is *Cyrus Whitfield*. But, when the proper time comes, it's for you to prove that my papers are not correct."

"Seems to me, gentlemen, that you are chasing the devil 'round a stump, and if you keep it up much longer, it'll be pretty tough work guessing which one leads, and which one is doing the chasing! Now, since you've brought up the name of *Cyrus Whitfield*, judge, perhaps I can put in a word or two which may be worth listening to."

As he spoke, Solemn Saul Sunday moved from behind the chair to which his prisoner was bound, standing where his actions could be observed by all, one hand slipping into his bosom and clasping upon a certain object, as yet unseen.

"Of course, as our legal friend, the judge, has pertinently claimed, none of us are under oath, legally administered. Still, what I am about to offer can and shall be repeated under oath, as truthful evidence, when the proper time comes 'round."

"I say that *Cyrus Whitfield* actually personated Ethelbert Lawrence, on the occasion so frequently alluded to; the sale of the Neverfail."

"How are you going to *prove* that lying assertion?" sneeringly interrupted Chadwick.

"If necessary, by the testimony of *Cyrus Whitfield* himself," gravely bowed the detective. "I hold his full and explicit confession. In that confession he reveals the entire plot, so far as it relates to the theft of the mine; if he knew, he never mentioned the intended murder of Ethelbert Lawrence."

"How could he, unless by criminating himself?" mocked Chadwick. "No doubt he and Bart Clough were playing caboots; one to kill Lawrence, the other to sell out at a heavy figure! But—"

"Very ingenious, judge, but don't let your invention carry you clear across the safety-line," warned the ex-boomer. "If that sale was a fraud, of course you could not profit by it, when the fraud is shown."

"Teach your granny how to suck eggs! I can declare my belief, *out of court*, but when every word is an oath, the burden of proof will rest on *your* side. Then—how'll you clear it up, without producing both of your marvelous witnesses?"

"We can do just that, judge," coolly nodded Solemn Saul, drawing a discolored notebook from his bosom, resting it, still closed, on the table before him. "Not sick, judge?"

"Sick?" hoarsely repeated Chadwick, tearing his gaze from that book with an evident effort, then forcing a yawn. "Sick and tired with so much infernal rubbish—yes!"

"Sorry, but every little helps, and pretty much all that's been said here this morning was necessary to twist the noose for your neck. But now—leaving the minor details, the training and getting ready for carrying out the audacious fraud—I'll tell you of a little adventure which happened to me, not so very long ago."

Solemn Saul went on to narrate how he had suspected the judge, how he had dogged him to the deserted shaft, and how a fortunate accident had given him a chance to inspect that drift ahead of Hugh Chadwick.

He gave a brief description of what he saw, and what he found, then went on to add:

"In this book, once owned by *Cyrus Whitfield*, the entire plot is exposed, each day's argument and happenings being set down in full. It is frankly admitted that all these notes were made by his, Whitfield's hand, as possible material for future profit, in the shape of blackmail. And, after mentioning an actual resemblance in form and feature between himself and Ethelbert Lawrence, Whitfield goes on to tell how he, for pay, successfully impersonated the real owner of the Neverfail."

"A lie—all a clumsy lie!" gasped Chadwick, hoarsely.

"When that fraudulent sale was completed, Whitfield was decoyed by Hugh Chadwick to a deserted shaft, mention of which has already been made. Whitfield was knocked down that shaft, and left for dead by his assassin!"

"*Cyrus Whitfield did* die, but not at once, as Chadwick doubtless expected. His legs were horribly shattered. In falling, he had bitten his tongue so nearly in two parts, that he could not make a sound louder than a whisper. And so, with a lingering death before him, he crawled into a corner, there to die—but not until he had written a full account of his murder, of his assassin, of his dying hope that justice might be done, not only to his slayer, but to those who might have been wronged by his stealing another's identity."

"I deny it all!" mumbled Hugh Chadwick, convicted by his own ghastly face, but fighting on through pure instinct. "All lies—all lies!"

"Will you persist in saying that when—Wait a few moments, judge, and you, gentlemen!" grimly laughed Solemn Saul, passing over to the tool-room, to quietly return with a hideous object carried in his arms.

It was the mummy-corps of *Cyrus Whitfield*, and the judge broke down.

"Don't—take it away!" he screamed, then fell into a fit.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CLEARING THE STAGE.

THAT grisly witness proved to be the last feather, and Hugh Chadwick broke down, never again to fight against grim fate.

For some hours it was doubtful if he would ever rally from the fit into which that hideous sight, coming after so many stunning blows, had thrown him, but with careful nursing his senses came back, and he made a full confession.

Now that he realized all was lost, Hugh Chadwick was man enough to make what reparation lay in his power, and he did his level best to clear up all such points as were still obscure and difficult to understand.

He admitted having hired Bart Clough to kill Ethelbert Lawrence, to whom he had sold his share of the Neverfail for a price far too low, now that the "mother vein" had been struck. Still, he admitted that at the time of selling out, he had thought his end of the bargain by far the richest.

He confessed to having tempted *Cyrus Whitfield*, who was always more or less under the influence of liquor, into playing the part of Ethelbert Lawrence, sacrificing his magnificent beard,

and then "making up" to increase his natural resemblance to the missing mine-owner.

The bold trick proved to be a complete success, and after making sure that Whitfield could play the part, care was taken to select some of the best and most reputable citizens to witness that fraudulent sale and transfer.

After this sale, Cyrus Whitfield, still as Ethelbert Lawrence, gave a farewell "blow-out" to a goodly number of friends, then took passage on the stage, declaring that he was homeward bound, to mine no more!

He had been paid in full. He had sworn to never return, to never allude in any way, shape or form, to their past dealings, should fate ever throw him into company with Hugh Chadwick.

Instead of keeping his oath, Whitfield only remained absent long enough to grow a beard, then came back, to blackmail the now flourishing miner. And then, as his last desperate chance for safety, Chadwick decoyed the drunkard to the deserted shaft, pushing him down the pit, then fleeing in sudden horror.

Up to the night on which Solemn Saul dogged his footsteps, the judge had never dared inspect his horrible work, but then, wrought to desperation by the doubts born of the ex-boomer's vague yet strong resemblance to both Lawrence and Whitfield, Chadwick stole away from his home, to learn just which enemy he had to fear in Bouncer Bragg.

And, to dispose of the judge, once for all, it may be as well to add in this connection, that Saul Sunday, detective, succeeded in carrying him to prison, but he was never brought to trial. Those wounds of the scalp grew inflamed, brain-fever set in, and, shortly after being transferred to the hospital, Hugh Chadwick died, raving frightfully, his last companion being the mummy-corps of Cyrus Whitfield!

"Bouncer Bragg" had sundry explanations to make, as well as some of our other characters.

While facing down the judge, he had declared himself related to Cyrus Whitfield, though he had held his real name in reserve. Only one of those present at the time knew what that name was, and Nathan Knight was by no means eager to proclaim it.

It was a case of true love, and antagonistic kindred, but when everything came to a fair explanation, and Justin Whitfield modestly proved how really valuable his services had been, Nathan Knight could no longer hold out against the lovers: for Norine Lawrence was not too bashful to plead the cause of her lover!

Ethelbert Lawrence, while that little party were gathered together in the back-parlor of the Pluribus Hotel, likewise offered a few much-needed explanations.

He fully confirmed the story told by Bart Clough. He had saved the life of the fellow who was lying in wait to take his, though of course he did not learn that odd fact until much later.

He had received serious injuries before the bear was killed, and both he and Bart Clough must have suffered still more, only for the opportune arrival of one Turk Peterson, an old acquaintance of Bart's, and just then figuring as the head of a small gang of road-agents.

Bart Clough was not entirely evil. His heart, or conscience, had been sharply pricked by the generous conduct of the mine-owner, and he begged Peterson to do his best to save Lawrence, not only from his wounds, but from the hatred of Hugh Chadwick.

The road-agent had complied, taking the two injured men to his mountain retreat, where nearly two months crept by before Lawrence was recovered sufficiently to travel. And then, as Bart Clough had testified, his brain was an utter blank.

Bart took him to Denver, where a course of treatment soon brought about a full restoration of his mental faculties. And when there was no danger of a relapse through excitement, Bart Clough made full confession, as well as telling all he had learned during that spell of insanity.

Hugh Chadwick was in full possession of the Neverfail, waxing rich, the central figure in Gopher Slope. It was an unequal battle, but Lawrence vowed to have his own, and to play even with his false partner.

Bart Clough readily fell in with his idea, and together they planned much of what was to follow, much of what has been placed before the reader. They both disguised themselves, and finding a secure retreat near Gopher Slope, they laid their wires and prepared for the final fight.

The rescue of Hungry Mike Dobson from the lynchers was impromptu, despite the fact that, at one time, Dobson had belonged to the Peterson outfit, and, in his extremity, had given the distress call in use among the road-agents.

The robbery of the stage was planned, though Bart Clough was first intended to be Lawrence's backer. They knew Chadwick was expecting money to pay off his hands, and that was one of their strokes to even up the account against him.

So, too, Lawrence knew that Nathan Knight and Norine Lawrence were on their way to Gopher Slope, though he hardly expected meeting them on that particular stage.

He it was who wrote that anonymous note of warning, declaring that, in place of selling out,

Ethelbert Lawrence had purchased all claim to the Neverfail. This was to make sure the property should not be sold, before he could perfect his plans for fully exposing Hugh Chadwick and his fraudulent claims.

After these mutual explanations were made, Ethelbert Lawrence took his daughter apart from the rest, gravely but kindly questioning her concerning Justin Whitfield. And Norine, brave in her love, attempted no concealment.

She loved, even as she was beloved by Justin. Nathan Knight had taken a strong dislike to Whitfield, though, afterward, he admitted that he could bring no positive charge against that gentleman; only one of those aversions which even the best and wisest of men will sometimes take, without cause or foundation.

And then, father led daughter to lover, gravely giving them his blessing, bidding them be happy, only asking time in which he might fairly make the acquaintance of his future son-in-law, before they talked of settling down in life as a married couple.

There is little more to add before letting the curtain fall.

There was no longer any dispute as to the ownership of the Neverfail Mine, and Ethelbert Lawrence placed Bart Clough in charge of the property, until a sale could be effected. He had no desire to resume his mining life. The sale of the Neverfail would afford him ample to live upon, besides making generous gifts to the lovers.

That sale was made, in due time, and on Ethelbert Lawrence's recommendation, Bart Clough was installed as manager. He had sworn to give over drinking, and he faithfully kept his word. At the present writing, he is in comfortable circumstances, and Polly Maydew is his wife!

When the stage, driven by Joe Hooley, moved away from the Pluribus Hotel, with Nathan Knight, Lawrence, Norine and Justin Whitfield aboard, Fred Galloway stood gazing dreamily after them, heaving a great sigh as that daintily fluttering "kerchief vanished from view.

"What's the matter with you, sport?" asked Race Bolster, curiously.

"Gallus Fred" gave a start, then forced a smile as he caught that half-quizzical look.

"Well, pardner, if you must know, I was sighing after the moon! And if I was a better man, I'd never fall back without making a try for it, too! But—God be with 'em, I say!"

THE END.

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